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Summer 8-15-2019

## The Impact of Collegiate Sports Participation on African American Male Athletes' Academic Achievement

James E. Tucker

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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The Impact of Collegiate Sports Participation on African American Male Athletes' Academic  
Achievement

James Edward Tucker  
Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in  
Higher Education

Christopher Maddox, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

2019

## **Abstract**

African American male athletes are attending public and private universities and colleges across the United States in increasing numbers. Participating in a collegiate sport may interfere with the athletes' academic achievements. Past researchers have shown the influence of collegiate sport participation on African American identity and a striving for upward mobility among African American males through sports. However, African American male athletes are not offered the chance to describe their experiences while participating in collegiate sports. In this explanatory case study I explored how sports participation impacted the academic achievement of African American male collegiate athletes. Parsons's structural functionalism theory, Cross's nigrescence model of Black identity, and Deci and Ryan's self-determination theory formed the conceptual framework, or lens, for this study. The research question about how sports participation impacts the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes guided the study. The data revealed 3 recurring themes in participants' perceptions of the impact of athletics on their academics: (a) participants did not feel like regular students; (b) participants had long days, and (c) participants frequently mentioned the conflict of money taking priority over academics. All participants agreed upon adopting approaches to perpetuate higher academic achievement for African American male athletes. This study may affect African American male athletes, coaches, and parents. The implications of this study could encourage colleges and universities to address the perceptions of African American male athletes' failed academic achievements.

*Keywords:* African American male athlete, male academic achievement, collegiate sports, African American achievement, collegiate impact

## **Dedication**

This dissertation and its findings are dedicated to Kaala Tucker: my beloved daughter, your presence is always felt. It is also dedicated to Ms. Jimmie T. Tucker, my mother, thank you for all your guidance and usage of the “*hand*” to get me to understand behavior and academics. Though you are no longer with me on Earth, your spirit shapes me while your voice in my heart guides me. It is through you that I am me. Now, we can finally say we have a doctor in the family.

This dissertation is dedicated to all current and future administrators, African American male athletes, coaches, community activists, mentors, parents, and teachers. I am in awe of your service and commitment to produce awareness of the importance of education for long-term success. The following research is intended to foster rich in-depth conversations about the importance of academia even while accomplishing a dream of playing collegiate sports.

## **Acknowledgements**

I first must give honor and praise to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ because with him I can do all things. I would like to offer a handshake and hug to my dissertation chair, Dr. Christopher Maddox. I cannot begin to thank you enough for your words of encouragement, on-time inspiration, consistent communication, and most of all your spirit of genuine caring. To my dissertation committee, Dr. James Therrell and Dr. Jill Bonds, I also extend a hug and handshake for your needed feedback, gentle guidance, patience, and most of all the needed words, “you are going to be ok” and “you can do this” to assist in getting me across the finish line that appeared to be so far off, now, it is within the grasp of my hands.

To my family, friends, and church family: thank you for all your support and constant prayer. To my church family—Pastor Dr. M. E. Evans, Rev. Hornsby, Rev. Francis, Rev. Crayton, Sis. Frye, Sis. Carson, and Bro. and Sis. Mason, just to name a few—thank you for all your support and the quick check-ins to make sure I was still moving and not being stagnant. To Dr. C. Tunson, for your constant pull-to-the-side looks in my face and giving me words of wisdom, thank you. Thanks Kathy, for your words. Thanks to the Phelps. Thank you, Cannon boys. Thanks, Momma Doris. Thanks to my friend and brother, Donte Key. Thanks to my dad and stepmother, Leonard and Betty Hall. Thanks to my sisters, Latrivia Black and Kokeysha Smith, and my brother, Kevin Tucker. I want to especially thank my children, Jayven, Kaana, Jacquor, and Bryce. Thank you, because I know you really did not understand the process, but each of you allowed Dad to have the time he needed to complete such a task. To Anthony and Terri Arangio: your words and prayers were truly felt, thank you. To Tameka Sheffield: thank you for pushing and never letting me settle for anything short of completion, and most of all, letting me lean on faith, while in the hand of God.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In the United States of America, the most celebrated pastime is sports, a celebration shared by all nationalities and ethnicities (Rushin, 2016). Sports have allowed families, communities, and individuals to unite as one (S. Davis, 2016). The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2016) in response to the Brown vs. Board of Education tried to desegregate football teams; however, not until the late 1960s and early 1970s did colleges and universities in the South accept African American males to play on their football teams. As African American males began to play for colleges and universities, a concern began to arise pertaining to academics and athletics. Currently, African American male athletes are showing a 12% rise in attendance and at the same time showing a 16% decline in academic achievement (Rushin, 2016). For African American male athletes, today's typical conversation about sports and academics has somehow shifted away from the importance of academic achievement to becoming a professional athlete (S. Davis, 2016; Glass, 2015; Rushin, 2016).

Within Chapter 1, I detail background information on African American male athletes, present the problem statement and the purpose of the study, as well as, a conceptual framework outlining the challenges that African American male athletes encounter while playing collegiate sports. Next, I present the research question and relevant definitions for the study. Following that is a discussion of the study limitations and significance of the study. Finally, I provide a rationale for the relevance of this study regarding the impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement.

### **Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

African American male athletes are playing basketball and football as a quick means to end financial problems and to gain notoriety in society (Glass, 2015). The notoriety that comes

from being a successful collegiate athlete may cause an altered reality of being a professional athlete in society (Rushin, 2016). Average African American male athletes must overcome many obstacles before accomplishing a professional career or obtaining a college degree (S. Davis, 2016). An alarming 38% of African American male athletes endure poverty and are reared in a single parent home. These athletes do not attend preschool nor have early educational programs, when compared to only 4% of Caucasian male athletes who endure these same challenges (Cooper, 2014).

African American males' academic limitations may lead to a variety of issues, such as frustration and feeling disconnected in class (Gaston-Gayles, 2014). Other issues with African American males are truancy and having the lowest reading scores or proficiencies in elementary, middle, and high school (United States [U.S.] Census Bureau, 2016). A low proficiency in reading—73% of African American males (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016)—may lead to dropping out of school, deficiency in basic skills, and feeling unmotivated regarding the importance of school (S. Davis, 2016). The effects of alternative disciplinary placements such as expulsions, suspensions, or truancy designations, create an absence of learning opportunities, which, in turn, consistently reinforce an educational disadvantage for African American males (Rushin, 2016).

African American male athletes face limiting issues which demotivate their academic pursuits. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), 61% of African American males succeeded academically in comparison to 93% of Asian males and 88% of Caucasian males, meaning African American males have fallen significantly behind in academic achievement. A resulting negative mentality may develop that makes it hard for African American males to look at education as a tool to produce financial freedom (Glass, 2015). African American males often ponder quitting higher education, with approximately 13% dropping out (S. Davis, 2016;

National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2016). Cooper (2014) suggested large volumes of African American males enter the Department of Corrections because of low self-esteem and low academic accomplishment. Low self-esteem contributes to being easily influenced and creating a perception of a sense of belonging, while low academic accomplishment perpetuates a criminal mentality of survival (Robinson, 2014; Tamminen, Crocker, & McEwen, 2014).

The problems of late educational exposure and the cycle of the lack of educational importance have guided an inner struggle for African American males to find an existence in the world through academics (Cooper, 2014). Higher education is seen from a societal view as a vehicle to break the cycle of poverty in elementary, middle, and high school (S. Davis, 2016). The move toward education occurs when African American male athletes become influenced by family, media, and other outside influences that push athletic achievements over academic success (Glass, 2015). Rushin (2016) stated that African American male athletes, therefore, continue to struggle to reach optimal levels of academic achievement while attending colleges and universities.

African American male athletes are getting into colleges and universities through athletic scholarships; however, they are not obtaining high academic achievements (Harrison, Martin, & Fuller, 2015; Rushin, 2016). Colleges and universities across the United States are welcoming more college students of color than any other time in history (NCAA, 2016). Upon entrance at colleges and universities, the average African American male athlete demonstrates some academic concerns, which consist of poor basic writing skills, a low reading level or reading comprehension, and proper study skills (Glass, 2015). The Schott Foundation (2015b) reported that African American male athletes in high school are not graduating on time, and 54% are

graduating underprepared for higher learning institutions. Despite the NCAA (2016) stating 77% of African American male athletes are graduating from colleges and universities within 6 years, Harrison et al. (2015) reported that African American male athletes still have trouble with demanding coaches and schedules, as well as balancing athletic obligations with academic requirements.

Three main concepts or theories framed this study. Parsons's (1970) structural functionalism theory (SFT), Cross's (1971) nigrescence model of Black identity, and Deci and Ryan's (1990) self-determination theory (SDT) offer insight into the interconnecting factors that can assist in comprehending how African American male athletes are impacted by sports while pursuing a college degree (see Figure 1). Parsons's SFT discusses how African American male athletes are adjusting and changing to fit into society as a sense of belonging. Cross's nigrescence model of Black identity discusses the five stages of becoming Black and how that process becomes a core foundation for the African American male athletes' pursuit for advancement through monetary gain. Deci and Ryan's SDT offers an understanding of how African American male athletes' determination stems from outer and inner motivations to accomplish athletic or academic achievements.

### **Structural Functionalism Theory**

Parsons's (1970) SFT assumes that society is a system. Structural functionalism, as defined by Parsons, is an attempt to understand how parts and functions play a role in the support of society. The system is comprised of candidates who are social structures, institutions, or roles. Parsons discussed how when a society creates a sense of belonging, the citizen will become integrated into society. Through this integration, African American male athletes direct their behaviors based on meaningful social interactions or conflictual ones (Parsons, 1970).





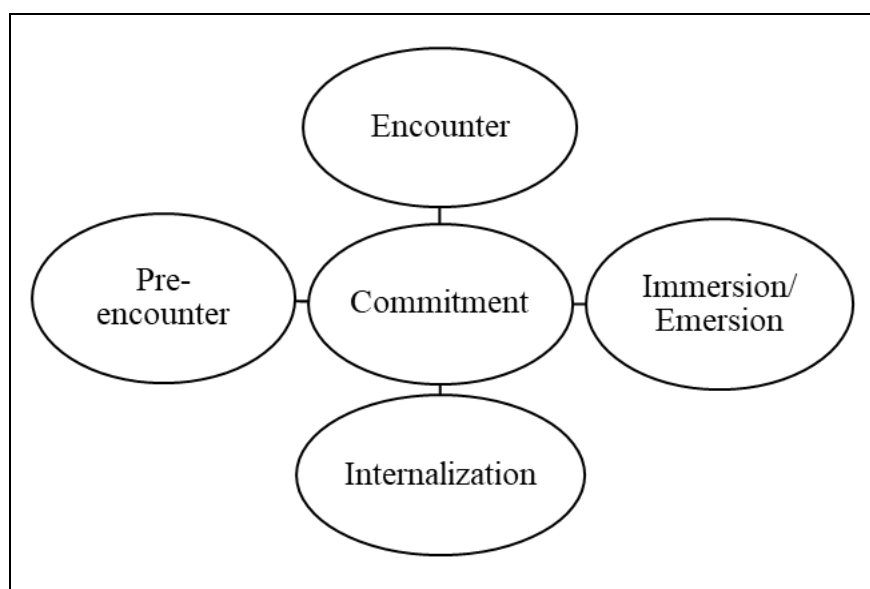
Figure 1. Conceptual framework: Structural functionalism theory.

### Nigrescence Model of Black Identity

Cross (1971) theorized a concept of identity called the nigrescence model of Black identity. For the purpose of this research, I use the synonym *African American identity*, instead of Black identity, to provide consistency in language. Cross discussed how the African American male must go through five stages of identity to become truly African American. The stages are (a) pre-encounter, (b) encounter, (c) immersion/emersion, (d) internalization, and (e) internalization-commitment. The pre-encounter stage consists of the African American male athletes who are shaped beginning in early development from their community or family values (Cross, 1991). In the encounter stage, African American male athletes try to figure out what created their change from academia to athletics. The immersion/emersion stage is when African American male athletes immerse themselves into world events pertaining to African American causes and emersion is when the African American male athletes create a balance of world views and causes (Cross, 1991). The internalization stage is when African American male athletes understand their positive identity and the obstacles they may confront as African American males in society. The final stage, internalization-commitment, takes place when African

American male athletes try to address oppression through activism in their communities (Cross, 1991).

Cross's theory examined the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that stem from a self-concept of identification. Cross's view aligns with Parsons's (1970) idea of meaningful socialization, as both view relationships as formed from interactions that cause individuals to transform to comply or reject the rules or norms of the system of interest. Cross's theory also revealed an internalization process like Parsons's SFT and Deci and Ryan's (1990) SDT. Cross, Parsons, and Deci and Ryan all transcribe from this internalization a transformation that creates a new understanding or perception about culture, life, society, and the self.

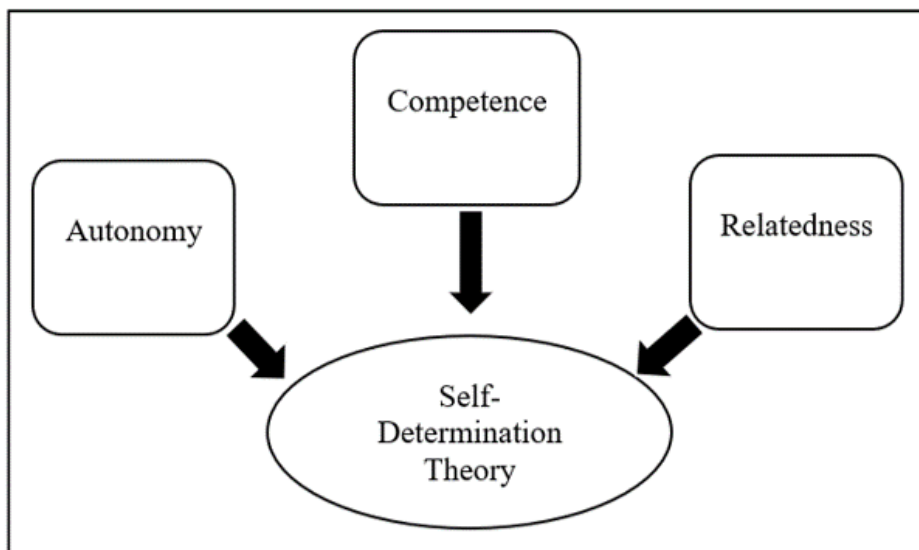


*Figure 2.* Conceptual framework: Nigrescence model of Black identity.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Deci and Ryan's (1990) SDT focuses on how, through some form of motivation, individuals push toward a change. Deci and Ryan defined SDT as an entity that constructs an individual to a behavior or cognitive change. This change can be positive or negative in competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence addresses controlling outcomes, while

autonomy looks at the self-determination within to guide the path for life. Deci and Ryan discussed relatedness like to Parsons's (1970) theory of social action and Cross's (1971) stage of immersion and emersion; all identify defining moments based on a desire to belong to a social group or organization. The theories of Parsons, Cross, and Deci and Ryan provided the conceptual framework to examine how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts academic achievement in obtaining a college degree in relation to their seeking acceptance from various entities such as peers, family, and society.



*Figure 3.* Conceptual framework: Self-determination theory.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Despite the advances in technology and understanding differentiated learning styles of African American male athletes, the challenges of completing higher education for these men still exist. Even though many institutions of higher learning are increasing efforts to lessen these challenges by improving infrastructure, hiring more people of color, providing more diverse tutoring options, and improving technology, African American male athletes continue to struggle at higher learning institutions. These efforts aim to increase African American male athletes'

percentage of participation and enrollment on campus and to persuade the best athletes to attend. African American male athletes should increase efforts in academic achievement because the odds of becoming a professional athlete are very small. The problem is a disconnection between academics and how collegiate sports participation impacts the academic achievement of African American male athletes.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation impacts the pursuit of academic achievement among African American male collegiate athletes. African American male athletes are experiencing increased entrance into higher education and professional athletics. However, African American male athletes still fall short in comparison to other male athletes in obtaining a college degree (NCAA, 2016).

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study was:

1. How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes?

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

The rationale for this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore lived experiences of African American male athletes as they pertain to their collegiate athletic participation's impact on academic achievement. The explanatory case study design was the best approach to explore how these athletes balanced academics and sports involvement. Creswell (2013) suggested qualitative research for case studies involves various forms of personal experiences and perspectives. Yin (2014) explained the importance of an explanatory case study as an empirical inquiry to a phenomenon within the real-life context of using multiple sources of

evidence. Case studies are not intended to study the entire organization or group; rather, they are intended to focus on a particular issue (Yin, 2014). The unit of analysis in this study became athletes and their relationship with academics and sports.

The relevance of this study enabled me to explore and comprehend the intricate real-life experiences of African American male athletes whose participation in a collegiate sport may have interfered with their academic achievement. I utilized an explanatory case study research design, which was the most effective design for gathering and seizing the essence of individual's unique experience and did not confine the participants to a bounded system. Through the exploration of cognitive storage and emotional encounters as collegiate athletes, an explanatory case study allowed the participants to offer a voice to lived experiences.

The results of this study are significant because they provide administrators, coaches, collegiate athletes, parents, and teachers insight on how sports participation impacts academic achievement among African American male athletes. In this study, I interviewed African American male athletes who had recently graduated (2015–2018) from college, offering them the chance to share their lived experiences and valuable insight into what or how the participation of sports impacted their academic achievement. The findings of this case study may be used to develop effective academic and extracurricular support for African American male athletes. The results may also provide insight into how to support African American male students who are student–athletes, especially those students with little interest in academic achievement.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are provided to assist with comprehending the educational terms used throughout this dissertation.

*African American male collegiate graduate*: A male, 22–26 years of age, collegiate graduate (2015–2018), of African descent, and ancestry who is a U.S. citizen or person relating to any part of the African continent or its peoples, languages, or culture; a synonym is Black male (Hamlet, 2012).

*Athlete*: An African American male who has participated or participates in a major Division I university sport or professional sport—i.e., basketball or football (Harrison et al., 2015).

*Division I*: Institutions must sponsor at least seven sports for men and seven sports for women, which offer full scholarships to student athletes based on athletic ability (NCAA, 2016).

*National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)*: A member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes (NCAA, 2016).

*Weusi*: A Swahili word that means Black; a consciousness or attitude of accepting one's blackness (Cross, 1991).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

According to Shenton (2004), assumptions are so basic, the research problem itself could not exist without them. I conducted this case study after establishing fundamental assumptions. For example, the sample of African American male athletes in this study had a desire to accomplish the academic achievement of obtaining a college degree while attending their Division I school. I assumed each participant identified or belonged to the cultural group of African American male athletes. The final assumption was that each participant favored participation in sports over academics.

According to Yin (2014) limitations of an explanatory case study approach provide an in-depth perceptual and experiential understanding of the research question, regarding how

collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts academic achievement. Although with the methodology I employed a set of brief questions for face-to-face interviews, limitations existed within the study and findings. I conducted the research at a neutral site for all participants. The neutral site was a place with which all participants familiar. After the university replied and granted permission, I followed up with a face-to-face meeting with the university to obtain all needed participant information. I received the contact information for all participants from the basketball and football office after permission was granted from the university.

The responses from the research questions were heard from the voices of current African American male athletes. The essence of the themes, understanding, and experiences were limited to those voices. In the study I did not include males from elementary, junior high school, high school, or female African American athletes at any level. The chosen African American male athletes for this study were collegiate athletes (basketball or football) or those who had graduated with a college degree within the last 3 years (2015–2018) from a major Division I school. The information obtained concerning demographics allowed for me to identify how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacted their academic achievement. According to Maxwell (2012), limitations are characteristics of a design or methodology which impact or influence the interpretation of the findings from the research. Limitations included African American male athletes who had time restraints, participants who were not honest in their responses, and participants who stated they had a college degree or graduated yet had not done so.

Another limitation for this case study was my background and viewpoint as an African American male and former Division I collegiate athlete. My view on academics, when I was a

collegiate athlete, was that African American male athletes come into college ill-prepared for higher learning. My viewpoint, as it pertains to the college or university, was that, for me, it was about making money. I safeguarded against and prevented bias during the questions and interviews by not revealing my past affiliations or history. I also created a personal journal that I kept private and secured in a locked area in my office. In this journal, I kept my private thoughts. I did not interview current or past friends, nor did I share my personal or professional opinion with interviewees, to limit bias. I kept all names in confidence and will not share findings with friends, family, coworkers, or any other persons until three years after the completion of the case study.

Maxwell (2012) explained that delimitations are the choices the researcher makes for the study that are under the researcher's control. I chose the number of African American male athletes, a case study of participants at a major Division I school in the South, and other factors that influenced academic achievement such as parents, peers, and early academic foundation. Limitations and delimitations affect credibility, outcomes, and data within a case study (Merriam, 2015). The small sample size of participants in my case study may not have been enough to substantiate my findings. Therefore, what was recorded and stated by a small participant population of African American male athletes created a subjective truth. This would have been a problem in a quantitative study, but not in this qualitative one.

The delimitations for this explanatory case study consisted of making the time to reschedule appointments, making sure the space given was available on the dates and times of appointments, making sure that all participants were given ample amounts of time needed, and making sure I ameliorated biases associated with past experiences and emphasis of questions. The results from the explanatory case study may help to facilitate conversations between



teachers, coaches, administrators, and African American males pertaining to how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes affects their academic achievement.

Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope, define the boundaries along with the research question, and population that the researcher chooses to investigate (Simon, 2011). In this study I did not include African Americans participating in intramural sports. I delimited the study to 12 African American male athletes, conducted at only one Division I university in the South. Finally, the only sports considered in this case study were basketball and football due to the relatively large percentage of African American male athletes who participate in these two sports.

### **Summary**

This study represents a qualitative exploration of the impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement. The problem is a disconnection between academics and how collegiate sports participation impacts the academic achievement of African American male athletes. The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation impacts the pursuit of academic achievement among African American male collegiate athletes. Three main concepts or theories framed this study. Parsons's (1970) SFT, Cross's (1971) nigrescence model of Black identity, and Deci and Ryan's (1990) SDT. African American male athletes are experiencing increased entrance into higher education and professional athletics. Previous researchers, S. Davis (2016) and Glass (2015), highlighted playing sports for upward mobility and college preparatory supports. In this study I described the experiences of African American male athletes' participation of sports and that participation's impact on their academic achievement.

Previous research described sports participation and grade point average (Rushin, 2016), but no study directly assessed the lived experiences of African American male athletes. Sports participation among African American male collegiate athletes appears to impact their academic achievement. This impact is crucial for understanding how to address the graduation gap that exists between African American male athletes and both Asian male athletes and Caucasian male athletes (National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], 2016). Allowing participants to share their lived experiences, those of overcoming challenges and adversity while playing collegiate sports, exposed the difficult challenges African American male athletes face in maximizing their potential for academic achievement. Chapter 2 will include a more detailed review of literature relevant to the topic of this dissertation and will give a full description of the conceptual framework and an examination of peer-reviewed literature.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

According to NCAA administrators (2016), African American male athletes are graduating at a higher percentage rate than any other time in U.S. history. Harrison et al. (2015) believed these numbers, may be skewed to make the NCAA look good and to attract future African American male athletes to the top five NCAA conferences that continue to bring in more money. According to Rushin (2016) African American male athletes' enrollment in colleges and universities increased 12%. Despite advances in technology and understanding the differentiated learning styles of African American male athletes, challenges in completing higher education still exist.

The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation affects the pursuit of academic achievement among African American male collegiate athletes. To delineate this purpose, I did the following. First, I explored the results of other studies closely related to the current study topic. Second, I provided a framework for the importance of the study while comparing other findings with this study. Finally, I utilized this information to situate and substantiate my research question (Creswell, 2013).

In this chapter, I review the impact of athletics on the collegiate academic achievement of students, and in particular, African American male athletes, by examining the work of authors including Colon (2014), Cooper (2014), S. Davis (2016), and Harrison et al. (2015). I discuss how African American male athletes contend with identity and role confusion. Next, I discuss how African American male athletes have shifted commitment through sports participation. I then discuss how African American male athletes lose academic focus because of wanting to become a professional athlete. Finally, I synthesize and critique the research pertaining to how

collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement, thus providing a rationale for the appropriateness of my research question.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

Machi and McEvoy (2016) noted the importance of a literature search strategy for planning how information will be used in developing the research argument. The conceptual framework helped define the search strategy and provided direction and focus to target related research to support the topic of this study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The initial search yielded over 75 referred articles using the key terms: *male, African American, sports, higher education, and academics*.

The literature review involved many authors. I used the Concordia University library website, Google Scholar, and libraries near my house in Texas such as the Arlington Public Library and University of Texas at Arlington main library, to identify literature. A Concordia University Reference Librarian assisted to create the literature search strategy. The databases searched included: (a) ProQuest, (b) Dissertation and Theses Global ProQuest, and (c) Education Resource Information Center (ERIC). To gain further insight into this research, I conducted an additional search utilizing the key terms: *academics, achievement theory, male African American achievement, athletics, and male African American identity*. I conducted my final search using a reference list from a Boolean search to discover further information on this topic. I used the following research terms: *college sports* and *academic achievement*.

Upon completion of the initial examination of the literature, several authors provided search strategies that I then implemented. For example, Glass (2015) suggested using the term *male African American identity* and to avoid using the term *African American male athlete*, which results in too many unnecessary outcomes. Harrison et al. (2015) suggested using the

terms *motivation* and *academic achievement*, and to not use the terms *African American*, *male*, *student grades*. S. Davis (2016) recommended using the term *experience of African American male athletes* and to avoid using *male African American athletes in higher education*, which led to an increase in articles.

In this literature review, I explore research related to how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement. I examine how athletic engagement may interfere with African American male athletes' academic achievement. In addition, I discuss the conceptual framework that researchers have used to explain African American male athletes' approaches to academic achievement. Authors such as Colon; Comeaux and Harrison; S. Davis; Glass; Hamlet; Harrison, Martin, and Fuller; Stodolska, Sharaievskaya, Tainsky, and Ryan; and Thompson and Davis repeatedly occurred in searches for this study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework establishes the theoretical basis upon which this study was developed and guides the direction of the research, while positioning the study within the existing literature (Jewish Council, 2020). Three main concepts or theories framed this study. Parsons's SFT (1970), Cross's (1971) nigrescence model of Black identity, and Deci and Ryan's (1990) SDT.

SFT (Parsons, 1970, 2007), nigrescence model of Black identity (Cross, 1971, 1991, 1995), and SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1990, 2000) provided a conceptual framework to examine how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement. Such a framework correlated with the case study because they provided lenses for analysis of how the culture of African American male athletes plays a role in society and adjusts their identity, and how self-determination assists in creating an understanding of how collegiate

sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement in obtaining a college degree.

### **Parsons's Theories of Structural Functionalism, Social Action, and Socioeconomic Status**

**Structural functionalism theory.** Parsons (1970) is best known for his theories of structural functionalism and social action. Structural functionalism also includes the ability to adapt and change, not just to live, but to survive (Parsons, 1970). According to Parsons, society has a goal to create a sense of belonging. This belonging presumably moves the African American male into the next step of integration. Integration allows the person to function within the goals of that society to create a cohesive system (Parsons, 1970). That system must be maintained through a sense of latency. Latency is something that a culture has but is naked to the visible eye (Parsons, 1970, 2007). Through this latency, a change can happen that the individual may use to create and generate a new perspective and practice, resulting in a new action for unlimited possibilities (Parsons, 1970). Structural functionalism for African American male athletes allows them to adjust to how their culture insists that they support society through an assimilation or acculturation of norms, rules, and accepted behaviors from society; such as the idea of attending a college or university (Glass, 2015; Parsons, 1970). Their acculturation could include dress, speech, or religious views (Parsons, 2007; Rushin, 2016). African American male athletes take on their transformational views of Western civilization based on the emphasis they see in value or worth (S. Davis, 2016). This value or worth derives from what society marks as being successful by having big houses and luxury cars, or by being famous (LaGuradia, Ryan & Deci, 2014). Thus, African American male athletes participate in sports as a way to accomplish such goals without the rigor of academic achievement (Beamon, 2012; S. Davis, 2016; Gaston-Gayles, 2014; Glass, 2015; Holloway, 2000).

**Social action theory.** Parsons (1970) also looked at how interactions between individuals and society may bring about an unconscious change, thus resulting in a shift of behavior. This theory is solely based on social actions and thusly named social action theory, which focuses on how people interact with each other based on meaningful actions that have been assigned from relationships. These actions have a cause-and-effect relationship that stems from the past and present (Parsons, 1970).

When the individual and society have some type of struggle, the struggle creates a new cooperation leading to social action following five principles. The first principle occurs when individuals become their own actors through interactions and personal experiences (Parsons, 1970, 2007). The actor references the individual and his ego or self that matures as the individual develops. The second principle occurs when the actor becomes the individual seeking a desired goal from experiences and interactions. The desired goal cannot be obtained if the individual does not want it nor exerts himself to attain it. In the end, the desired goals are based on a set of futuristic achievements from affairs based on events or actions. The third principle occurs when the actor, because of meaningful socialization, has more than one way to accomplish a goal obtained from conversations, experiences, and interactions (Parsons, 1970, 2007). This accomplishment happens because of the conditions that surround the individual. The conditions imposed on the individual may be external or internal. External conditions entail the physical environment or laws of the society. Internal conditions are those that form on the internal character of the individual. These self-imposed opportunities or restrictions are situational. The fourth occurs when goals and means are set by the individual with realistic outcomes addressing strengths and weaknesses within a time frame (Parsons, 1970). The final occurrence is when the

actor becomes subjective to his decisions from new meaningful interactions because of a shift based on the individual attitude, mood, or opinion of the influence (Parsons, 1970).

**Theory of socioeconomic status.** In addition to his five principles of social interaction, Parsons (1970) categorized socioeconomic inequality into three areas, which became influential in outlining the theory of socioeconomic status. Parsons discovered that status has a position in the overall social structure in the form of careers and the different family positions a person may have. Even though Parsons correlated position with status, an implied hierarchical referent stands on the principle of honor and prestige. Parsons's core notion was that a person's social status (rank) affects how other people interrelate with him or her, not primarily based on income or wealth but with the foundation of honor or status.

Parsons's (1970) theory of socioeconomic status also examined the family structure as a key component of stratification. Stratification means that families operate as a unit of sharing interests and commonalities (Parsons, 1970, 2007). Families often only have one wage earner, the breadwinner, and decisions are typically made for geographic mobility or better educational support (Parsons, 2007). Families share an interest for the entire family not just for individual needs or wants, but what is best for the well-being of their children (Parsons, 1970). The key to stratification for Parsons is the idea that the family is led by a male household figure who, in turn, gives the family their social status.

Parsons (1970, 2007) created an understanding that became the core foundational principle that society must differentially evaluate all positions for persons in society and create an understanding so those persons would be motivated to get the most important positions and the training necessary for those positions. African American male athletes, through their understanding of socioeconomic status and the importance of position, often will attend a college



or university to try to obtain such a high status. Parsons's (1970, 2007) structural functionalism offers insight into the adaptability of African American male athletes and a desire to have meaningful relationships to bring about change. African American male athletes, while living amid stratification, create a motivation to change their family status and position in the quickest way, through sports not education. This motivation, which stems from sports, creates a new shift toward a belief about strengths and weaknesses with realistic outcomes based on African American male athlete's perception of structural functionalism.

Parsons (1970) is best known for his theories of structural functionalism and social action. Structural functionalism also includes the ability to adapt and change, not just to live, but to survive (Parsons, 1970). Parsons also developed the theory of socioeconomic status, asserting that a person's social status affects how other people interrelate with him or her, not primarily based on income or wealth but with the foundation of honor or status. These theories are crucial to analyzing the functional structure, and social and economic status of African American male athlete within collegiate sports.

### **Cross's Nigrescence Model of African American Identity**

In the second theory framing this study, Cross (1971) theorized a concept that may provide insight into how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement, based on identity. Cross identified five stages to becoming African American. These stages include: (a) pre-encounter, (b) encounter, (c) immersion/emersion, (d) internalization, and (e) internalization-commitment (Cross, 1991). Cross took these stages and developed them into a model that attempted to identify healthy African American identity development.

**Pre-encounter.** The first stage, *pre-encounter*, was based on a person's feelings, behaviors, and thoughts characterized from a self-concept identification. This first identity shapes early development for African American male athletes (Cross, 1991). An example is when African American male athletes have very little focus on race but emphasize how they live, their occupational goals, and their religion. During this stage African American male athletes have low salience and are very neutral about race. The pre-encounter stage also yields negative references for African Americans as a group. African American male athletes may not need an identity change if their pre-encounter attitude gives them some type of fulfillment (Cross, 1991).

The main factors of miseducation and oppression from the past have produced pre-encounter attitudes and skepticism about the abilities of African American male athletes. Based on the American standard of success created by Caucasians, African American male athletes may experience success, and this success—not their experience—has led to their pre-encounter attitudes (Cross, 1991). This process can happen with an idealization of Caucasians and Caucasian cultures, with African American male athletes demonstrating anti-African American behavior. In this stage, anti-African American male behaviors are shown because African American male athletes have been raised with Caucasian/Westernized ideologies, and these notions are stored in African American male athletes' subconscious (Cross, 1991).

Cross (1991, 1995) later revised the nigrescence model of African American identity and placed an emphasis on the pre-encounter stage, bringing out the salience factor and making it the central part of his new theory. No longer are African American male athletes anti-African American; they have a low salience for race. African American male athletes who have developed this African American identity will meet and exceed their personal, financial, and/or

career needs, and often have a hard time maintaining prolonged interest in African American issues or concerns (Cross, 1991).

**Encounter.** The second stage to the nigrescence model of African American identity is called *encounter*. Encounter is a process that happens when African American male athletes try to pinpoint those circumstances or situations and events that have created the metamorphosis for that African American male (Cross, 1971). This process is when African American male athletes have a positive or negative experience with someone from the African American race or someone from another race. The circumstance, situation, or event shapes how African American male athletes will act because of the personal impact the event has had on their lives. This creates a challenge to the Eurocentric perspective that was created in the pre-encounter stage. African American male athletes must experience some type of encounter that happens when they are not ready or prepared, thus shaking, shattering, and transforming their worldviews (Cross, 1991).

**Immersion and emersion.** *Immersion* and *emersion* comprise the third stage of the nigrescence model of African American identity (Cross, 1971). In this stage, immersion and emersion split into two different stages, creating an inner struggle at times. During immersion, African American male athletes will immerse themselves into African American world events, politics, and community causes, and even join new organizations for the cause (Cross, 1971). African American male athletes will try to liberate themselves from Caucasian ideologies and gain a new self-identity. African American male athletes will read literature and focus on history and the experience of being African American. The new convert in this new immersion will also demonstrate Weusi anxiety (Cross, 1991).

Emersion is the gaining of insight from the immersion that opens the door to take control of the African American male emotional and intellectual experience of change. This change

allows African American male athletes to go through a leveling off period that stems from the reality that role models and personal growth are intricate parts of their identity development. African American male athletes can also go through a period where their response to this stage is simply to drop out (Cross, 1991). Dropping out means to remove the African American male from any involvement with African American issues, causes, or concerns. This is not reverting to the pre-encounter attitude, but a survival strategy to keep the African American male from having a mental breakdown because the race problem is too big or insurmountable (Cross, 1991).

The immersion-emersion stage sets the foundation for African American male athletes' identity development and a powerful psychological comprehension of the environment they reside in and the worldviews they may share with society (Cross, 1991). African American male athletes at this point will begin to create their own worldviews from experience and construct a new framework based on information that they have obtained and gathered about the African American race. A change has not yet happened for the African American male, but a commitment to the change has been instilled (Cross, 1991). This identifies African American male athletes and their immersion in being African American (Cross, 1991). Emersion brings about a more balanced worldview. Cross (1991) alluded to the fact that somehow during this powerful immersion, a strong sensation fueled by guilt, rage, and pride slowly develops into a new sense of pride. During this stage of emersion, African American male athletes will shed all negative stereotypes that are linked to being African American and slowly begin to become neutral through their own personal growth and recognition of their own African American identity development. The immersion-emersion stage is an inner conflict between the old and the new emersion identity (Cross, 1971). This battle is seen when African American male athletes

attend a university or college with the sole focus on becoming a professional athlete and not on obtaining a college degree.

**Internalization.** When African American male athletes meet the challenges and problems associated with this transformation, the *internalization* stage begins (Cross, 1991). During this stage, three functions occur to protect African American male athletes from everyday occurrences. These three functions are: (a) to defend and protect from racists' insults, (b) to create a sense of being a part of society as a whole (belonging), and (c) to be involved with other cultures outside the African American one. The African American male athletes become at ease with the self and move away from Weusi anxiety into Weusi pride (Cross, 1991). They also move away from how friends see them to realize self-confidence in their own African Americanness, therefore creating an inner calmness to deal with other cultures (Cross, 1971).

The internalization stage describes how African American male athletes internalize a positive African American identity with a personal grasp of who they are and the limitations that they may encounter in society (Cross, 1991). African American male athletes believe that they have changed and have a new perception about the world and life. This transition period consists of working through their view of themselves and slowly getting away from how others see them. It includes an embracing of what it means to be African American and the reality that they can be an asset not a liability to society (Cross, 1991).

**Internalization-commitment.** The final stage is *internalization-commitment*, defined as when African American male athletes decide to become active in their community through challenging injustices and try to eliminate oppression. They focus on the big picture and long-term interests of the African American community (Cross, 1991, 1995). For African American male athletes, this becomes the greatest of all transitions. This transformation yields new self-

identity, self-awareness, self-esteem, and most of all, healthy racial identification. This healthy racial identification, for African American male athletes attending a university or college, is gained through learning communities and meaningful relationships (Cross, 1991, 1995). These learning communities and meaningful relationships move African American male athletes into a continued mindset that they must become a professional athlete by attending a university or college to serve their communities better (Cross, 1991, 1995).

Cross's nigrescence model of African American identity (1971) provides insight into how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement, based on identity. Cross's five stages to becoming African American come into play as African American male athletes immerse into collegiate sports. At the same time these athletes are balancing academic demands and trying to determine their identity in the new setting.

### **Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory**

The third theory framing this study is Deci and Ryan's (1990) theory about self-determination (SDT). Deci and Ryan's SDT provides a framework to comprehend many of the entities that construct individual behavior or cognitive motivation. Through construction and sense-making, a motivation is produced naturally or intrinsically. This theory is based on the concept that humans have three basic needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1990).

**Competence.** *Competence* is the need to control outcomes and to try to bring about effective outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1990). In the competence stage, individuals aim to become effective in dealing with the environment in which they have been placed. The individuals realize their motivation stems from some type of control or autonomous entity (Deci & Ryan,

1990, 2000). The control or autonomous entity evolves with the individual and shifts based on the individual's motivation of interest.

**Autonomy.** The *autonomous* need from SDT follows the premise that individuals have a need to control the course of their lives. This need is also referred to as self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1990). With the basic need for autonomy, individuals should develop a need to understand their behavior originates from within.

**Relatedness.** *Relatedness* in SDT refers to an individual who needs a sense of belonging to a social group or organization (Deci & Ryan, 1990, 2000). These individuals develop a need to have close affections through their relationships with others. This relationship with others becomes a self-determined behavior that integrates a regulation of possible socio-contextual factors that fulfill all three basic psychological needs rather than their satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1990, 2000). African American male athletes, through their participation in sports, gain such satisfaction. Their satisfaction of affection happens through their acceptance by peers, acknowledgement by the community, and self-determination to control the outcomes in their lives.

As African American male athletes go through life, they face some challenges they can take as an opportunity to grow. These challenges go against the cognitive structures they may have, thus creating a solution they internalize as a new cognitive structure to integrate into their understanding of their worldviews. These worldviews create a continuum that classifies the motivation into three areas: intrinsic, extrinsic, or amotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1990).

*Intrinsic motivation* refers to the things that encourage African American male athletes to do something because it is rewarding to them internally. The reward arises from within; nothing externally is received (Deci & Ryan, 1990). *Extrinsic motivation* is the opposite of intrinsic;

where motivation for African American male athletes comes from some outside force to engage in an activity or behavior to receive a reward or avoid punishment. *Amotivation* is the concept that African American male athletes may not be motivated toward a behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1990, 2000). These individuals have no inspiration or motivation to engage in an activity through any means of participation. Individuals who exhibit amotivational behaviors will not participate in sports, belong to any social clubs, or find it necessary for such things, because the activity or outcome has no value for them (Deci & Ryan, 2000). African American male athletes are not led by amotivational outcomes, but have an intrinsic or extrinsic factor that provides their motivation.

The theories of structural functionalism (Parsons, 1970), nigrescence model of African American identity (Cross, 1971), and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1990, 2000) all offer a foundational framework to consider how African American male athletes are impacted by sports while pursuing a college degree. Whether an individual is trying to create a better socioeconomic status, become more aware of his identity as a Black American, or define or redefine his own personal determination, his educational pursuit eventually becomes a journey shaped by many entities and a mindset of acceptance or change. These theories offer a comprehensive awareness of African American culture and the process of forming an inner drive for improvement.

This inner drive, in turn, provides a foundation to examine the impact athletics has on the academic preparation and pursuit of African American male athletes at various stages in their cognitive and social development. African American male athletes, while experiencing numerous stages of the nigrescence model of African American identity, experience a growth mindset during the stages. A growth mindset should consist of understanding self-identification, adaptation, and community; all while grasping the importance of attending a university or



college with the understanding that the importance of education may still be an afterthought. The theory of structural functionalism (Parsons, 1970) yields an understanding of how African American male athletes adapt and change based on the function of their culture through assimilation and acculturation. The nigrescence model of African American identity (Cross, 1971) explains stages that African American male athletes may go through. Finally, the theory of self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 1990, 2000) explains the cognitive and behavioral motivations that African American male athletes experience relating to their desire for social or positional change in society. These theories do not offer concrete evidence but shed light on how sports participation among African American male collegiate athletes impacts their pursuit of academic achievement in obtaining a college degree.

Deci and Ryan's framework includes many of the entities that construct individual behavior or cognitive motivation. Through construction and sense-making, African American male collegiate athletes develop a motivation that is produced naturally or intrinsically. This theory is based on the concept that humans have three basic needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and provided a framework for me to examine African American male collegiate athletes' competence, autonomy, and relatedness both in sports and academics (Deci & Ryan, 1990).

### **Conceptual Framework Summary**

Parsons's (1970) theories of structural functionalism, social action, and socioeconomic status help provide a framework for this study as I analyzed the data from interviews and a focus group discerning the voices of African American male collegiate athletes in light of socioeconomic structure, and how that came into play with these athletes developing their identity in the collegiate sports and academic scenario. Structural functionalism also includes the

ability to adapt and change, not just to live, but to survive (Parsons, 1970). The participants shared how other people interrelated with them, academically, athletically, economically, and in light of honor or status. These theories are crucial to analyzing the functional structure, and social and economic status of African American male athlete within collegiate sports.

In developing that identity, Cross's nigrescence model of African American identity (1971) provides insight into how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement, based on identity. Cross's five stages to becoming African American come into play as African American male athletes immerse into collegiate sports. At the same time these athletes are balancing academic demands and trying to determine their identity in the new setting.

In light of that double demand, the third theory, Deci and Ryan's (1990) SDT, was important to this study with analyzing how the participants constructed their individual behavior or cognitive motivation. Through construction and sense-making, African American male collegiate athletes develop a motivation that is produced naturally or intrinsically. This theory provided a framework for me to examine African American male collegiate athletes' competence, autonomy, and relatedness both in sports and academics (Deci & Ryan, 1990). Parsons's, Cross's, and Deci and Ryan's theories helped me to frame this study by guiding me in my search strategies for the literature review, providing a point of reference for developing my research question as well as the interview and focus group questions, and analyzing the data collected. These theories helped me identify clusters and themes as they emerged from the data, and allowed me to analyze the data in light of these theories, particularly how African American male collegiate athletes develop their identities and relate with others functioning within the structure of college athletics and academics.

## **Review of the Literature and Methodological Issues**

In this literature review, I examined factors that impact the educational progress of all African American male collegiate athletes attending any major Division I university. Through a literature review, I looked at how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement. Locke (2011) suggested that sports may influence an athlete's identity, hence impelling them toward a renewed commitment to sports instead of academics. Senko, Hulleman, and Harackiewicz (2011) posited these issues are old commitments with new challenges requiring a new direction.

While numerous African American male athletes attend a university on athletic scholarships, many of those African American male athletes neglect to develop a strong academic foundation; therefore, academics becomes less important than sports (Glass, 2015; Lee & Rawls, 2015). This lack of effort for education leads to dismal results for African American male athletes (Gill, 2014). According to Harrison et al. (2015), African American male athletes are not focusing on academics because they perceive sports as an avenue toward monetary rewards. Research on structural functionalism, the nigrescence model of African American identity, and self-determination offer some resolution on the issue concerning the connection between sports and academics. Ascribing cause and effect to a distant past experience for African American males involves too many intervening factors that accrue over time. However, a link could exist between sports and academics that may influence identity pertaining to athletes and self-identification, and an athlete's change in commitment.

### **Athletes and Self-Identification**

African American male athletes experience a time of independence and excitement. This period is when most young men are beginning to mature and explore who they are and enter an

identity versus role confusion stage (Harradine, Coleman, & Winn, 2014). Not only are they exploring the world, they are getting to know who they are and their strengths and weaknesses, while gaining a new personal sense. Gucciardi, Hanton, Gordon, Mallett, and Temby (2014) suggested that African American male athletes who come from low socioeconomic households experience classroom frustration and withdraw faster than any other ethnicity. During the early years, sports can become one of the avenues for autonomy for African American male athletes (Glass, 2015). Playing a sport becomes a way for African American male athletes to take charge of their lives and to adapt to their environments (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). During this personal identification, academics can sometimes get pushed aside for the athletics (Locke, 2011).

One way that African American male athletes demonstrate their personal identification is by *taking charge of their lives* this charge starts with a personal initiative. With all the demands for academic performance, study time, the allocation of economic resources, and human interaction, the proper balance of academics and athletics can get skewed (Glass, 2015). These events may take class time away from athletes, which, in turn, may interfere with time for academics. Harrison et al. (2015) suggested that individuals are motivated by extrinsic factors such as rewards or approval from peers. Harrison et al. revealed that rewards include gaining perks in school from coaches and teachers and, sometimes, financial assistance. Approval from peers means getting special assistance for tutoring from other students, homework help, and the desire for other students to be in the athlete's inner circle. African American male athletes, at this phase, have very little parent involvement in academics and experience a positive shift in sports participation (Gucciardi et al., 2014). The positive shift of sports participation includes coming to games, buying athletic gear, and having conversations about their sport.

Another way African American male athletes demonstrate their personal identification is through self-esteem. This process of self-esteem plays a vital role for the athletes in their personal identification process. Research has shown a correlation between the number of activities in which athletes are involved and academic self-esteem (Camp, 1990; Colon, 2014; Hamlet, 2012; Williams, 2014). Even with opposition, critics agree that sports can foster accountability, responsibility, and dependability. According to Cusick (1987), athletics can alienate one subgroup from another because of the athletes' hard time adjusting to other peer cultures. However, the participation in sports creates a host of positive outcomes such as reduction in dropping out of high school and increased academic performance (Camp, 1990; Thompson & Davis, 2013). A reduction in dropping out of high school is directly correlated with being a member of a group that holds each person accountable to being there and doing their part. African American male athletes, because of the bond they share with fellow athletes, place themselves in the position to graduate, even if they do not attend a university or college on scholarship. The increase in academic performance happens, for African American male athletes, because of trying to get an athletic scholarship. According to Glass (2015), African American male athletes are aware of the low chances, less than 10%, of getting an athletic scholarship. Therefore, African American males only do the minimum academic work and preparation.

The No Pass No Play Law, which was created by Ross Perot from Texas, to ensure all high school students pass all required courses to be eligible to play extracurricular activities, and to make athletes more accountable to maintaining at least a 2.0 grade point average, has had a negative impact on the success of African American male athletes (Cooper, 2014; O. Davis, 1996; Hambrick, 2001). A reform of the law prohibits students who fail one or more classes from participating in extracurricular activities (Hamlet, 2012). With new provisions, athletes can

restore eligibility if passing on a 3-week progress report (Stodolska, Sharaievska, Tainsky, & Ryan, 2014). Now, African American male athletes' academic development is stalled. Tutoring is suggested, offered, and given to achieve the minimum grade to restore eligibility (Glass, 2015). Critics state this academic failure in class is because playing sports has decreased the amount of academic study time (Glass, 2015; Harrison et al., 2015; Rushin, 2016). However, Beamon (2012) and Hamlet (2012) indicated that African American male athletes who are involved in the community at the school promote a positive school climate and create an environment of desired learning.

According to Lee and Rawls (2015), in data collected from the NAEP, 51% of African American male seniors in high school scored below a basic level in reading on standardized tests. In addition to this underachievement, male African American athletes are underrepresented in gifted and talented classes, overrepresented in special education, and consistent out-of-classroom placement, such as in-school suspension, expulsion, and alternative education placement (Lee & Rawls, 2015). Lack of academic classroom attendance or being present during teaching moments can have a huge impact on individual initiative for male African American athletes in high school (Tough, 2012). According to Glass (2015), African American male athletes, because of sports, increase their grade point averages and attendance. However, according to the NCES (2016), African American males' dropout rate remains around 10%. Cooper (2014) and Riley (2007) suggested African American male athletes have a limited amount of time to focus on academics or schooling; thus, participation in sports results in distractions that yield low academic achievement.

As a contradiction to the distraction theory, other key studies indicate that extracurricular activities, like sports, help students to achieve academically. Beamon (2012) conducted a study

of African American athletes and non-athletes to determine if participation in sports damages African American athletes' future academic success. Beamon revealed that sports did not negatively affect academic success. Beamon and Bell (2006) similarly found that African American male athletes who participated in sports increased their grade point averages, improved their academic self-concept, and attained an overall higher academic standing. The Schott Foundation (2015b) conducted a study on the benefits of high school sports participation concerning race and gender. The quantitative study revealed that African American male athletes held an advantage in benefits aimed at going to college. These benefits included, 56% being recruited athletically, advantages in the admission process of 68% obtaining admittance into a college or university, and 78% improved academic and social characteristics. Hamlet's (2012) case study findings also demonstrated that athletics for African American males generates thoughts and dreams that allow higher education to become a possibility, therefore forcing a positive behavior change.

According to Miller and Cummings (2017) self-control is a difficult task for anyone within 18–25 years of age. African American male athletes are no exception to the rule, due to maturity, puberty, and lack of frontal lobe development. The frontal lobe is the part of the brain where decisions are made and higher mental processes begin, such as executive decisions of planning (Miller & Cummings, 2017). When African American male athletes try to make the proper decisions and planning utilizing a rational process, there is high a probability of error due to the frontal lobe not being fully developed (Karges-Bone, 2016; Miller & Cummings, 2017). Rational problem solving involves several steps for effective resolution, namely: problem definition and formation, the generation of alternative solutions, decision-making, and finally, solution implementation and verification (D'Zurilla, Nezu, & Maydeu-Olivares, 2002).

Problem definition and formation involves knowledge of the specific definition of the problem, identification of the goal, and formation of the athlete's expected outcome. Generation of alternative solutions is a compilation of all the alternative resolves based on the problem. This step does not include an evaluation but focuses on forming good ideas. Hence, the decision-making requires the athlete to consider all consequences and outcomes with a plan that addresses his current situation and future goals. Finally, solution implementation and verification are where the athlete should research and contact other interests (D'Zurilla et al., 2002). According to New (2016), these steps should not consist of just being intuitive and spontaneous but should be rational because African American male athletes should consider all decision alternatives, taking a careful and systematic approach.

According to the NCAA (2016), nearly 8 million high school athletes are in the United States. Over 18,000 estimated student athletes play Division I, II, and III basketball and over 73,000 play Division I, II, and III football (NCAA, 2016). African American male athletes make up 48% of basketball players and 53% of football players across all divisions (NCAA, 2016). Though African American male athletes have made strides in maintaining eligibility, according to Fordham and Ogbu (1986), and Thompson and Davis (2013), the real competition in high school is not about grades or athletic accomplishments, but about winning in the eyes of other teenagers.

The autonomy of being an African American male athlete can sometimes mimic a male finding his identity. According to Harrison et al. (2015) competence arises when the individual is comfortable in his social environment and demonstrates and lives to his capacity. According to Thompson and Davis (2013), African American male athletes, when confronted with contrary messages about identity and power, must make a choice about identity. This identity of



autonomy can lead to academic turmoil. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) indicated that African American male athletes can develop an oppositional cultural frame. This oppositional cultural frame is when they begin to place emphasis on making good grades or demonstrating academic success.

According to Harrison et al. (2015), African American male athletes at this point may develop two identities: individual and collective. *Individual identity* occurs naturally in human development. *Collective identity* happens as a person becomes aware of his race and some of the bias associated with it. Collective identity is not clear or concrete and is shaped by individual experiences (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, & Worrell, 2001). Cross's (1971) nigrrescence model discusses becoming African American through a five-stage process. In this process, Harrison et al. (2015) suggested that African American male athletes should assume a race-less identity to become successful academically. This success academically may or may not have been impacted by the participation of sports. African American male athletes through their growth of autonomy and self-control conquers the mastery of sports but may have altered their academic achievement because of their sports participation.

### **Athlete's Change in Commitment**

African American male basketball players at Division I schools graduate from university or college at a rate of 77%. Division I football players graduate at a rate of 75% based on when the African American male athletes entered their institution in 2009 (NCAA, 2016). Although these percentages are higher than the typical college or university, the fact is some of the items left out of that percentage are retention, those who transfer, and the results are from a 6-year study (NCAA, 2016). According to Glass (2015), one of the fundamental problems is African American male athletes are recruited as students by demanding coaches. The athletic subculture

also works against the fact that many African American male athletes are ill-prepared for institutions of higher learning. African American male athletes may be ill-prepared because they are being asked to maintain a higher level of learning in academics and mastery in athletics from their institutions but are not being admitted on athletic scholarships for which they have only done minimum academic preparation while in high school (Hamlet, 2012).

Harrison et al. (2015) indicated that the economic benefit of obtaining a higher learning degree, for African American male athletes, pales in comparison to achieving a professional athletic contract or career. The Schott Foundation (2015a) suggested that less than half of African American male high school seniors will graduate on time in, four years or less. According to the NCAA (2016), 6.5% of high school student athletes are likely to play football in college, and 3.3% of high school student athletes will play basketball at the college level. African American male athletes in the Power 5 conferences (Atlantic Coast Conference, Big East Conference, Big 10 Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac 12 Conference, and the Southeastern Conference) of the NCAA are still only graduating at a rate of 55% within 6 years, compared to 68% of athletes overall and 75% of undergraduates (New, 2016). According to Glass (2015), over 30% of high school African American male athletes polled anonymously felt they had a great chance of going professional, while the NCAA (2016) revealed less than 1% (.08 and .03) would play professional football or basketball. With the idea that sports can become a way out of low-income areas, what is happening? According to the NAEP (2016), education is seen as a tool that can assist in dismantling the cycle of poverty. However, Gucciardi et al. (2014) suggested that African American male athletes continue to struggle in the arena of academics.

Harper, Williams, and Blackman (2013) reported that African American male athletes make up 57.1% of football teams and 64.3% basketball players, yet only 2.8% were degree-

seeking undergraduates between the years of 2007–2010. Beamon and Bell's (2006) examination of academics versus athletics and Beamon's (2012) case study concerning African American identity in sports explored how African American male athletes have been historically shaped to place a higher worth in extracurricular activities over academics. African American male athletes have been recruited from high schools that have had less preparation, tutoring times, ACT/SAT classes, and resources than their counterparts, the Caucasian male athlete (Harradine et al., 2014). African American male athletes experience this type of recruitment not as a choice of their own, but due to the fact of socioeconomics, parental level of education, public transportation, and public housing (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2014).

Universities want African American male athletes represented on campus; however, graduation may not be a focus. According to Harper et al. (2013), the top three universities that graduate African American male athletes at the highest rate are Northwestern University (83%), the University of Notre Dame (81%), and Villanova University (78%), while the top three universities that have the highest overrepresentation of male African American athletes are Marquette University (77%), the University of Mississippi (73%), and the University of Miami (72%). Though African American male athletes are graduating at a higher rate than those students who are of the same race who do not play sports, Harper et al. (2013) cited facts that the number is only one quarter of most institutions. African American male athletes should possess three levels of commitment—goal, sport, and institution (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). In reference to sport commitments, African American male athletes should have a view of the balance needed between academics and athletics (Cooper, 2014). The commitment toward the institution places a priority for African American male athletes to graduate from their respective universities (Colon, 2014).

The foundational standard that allows African American male athletes to experience success at higher learning institutions is to have a positive social and academic environment of influence (Glass, 2015). The social domain consists of the African American athlete male integrating himself into activities, events, and other student cultures outside of his sport. Involvement in a variety of atmospheres opens the African American male athlete to new ideas, cultures, and experiences (Harper & Davis, 2012). Optimal learning and achievement for the African American male athlete can happen when he naturally navigates through the institution and successfully matriculates through school (Glass, 2015).

According to Harrison et al. (2015), Martin, (2009), and Zirin (2008), basketball and football are the preferred sports for African American male athletes. The chances for a high school or college basketball or football player going professional are miniscule. The National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Football Association (NFL) draft less than .08% of African American male athletes each year. If the individual is lucky enough, he will need an education to make sure he does not return to the same socioeconomic situation he was trying so hard to leave. Rushin (2016) reported that the average NFL player makes a median of \$705,000 and an NBA player makes a median income of over \$2 million with 3 years of experience. According to Rushin (2016), a high percentage of African American male retired basketball and football players go broke after 3 years of retirement.

Motivation becomes a factor or hindrance (La Guardia, Ryan, Couchman, & Deci 2014). Deci and Ryan (2000) suggested that the motivation should happen because African American male athletes now are associating themselves with people who are positive, ambitious, and driven to excellence. According to Comeaux and Harrison (2011), those ambitions can come from areas such as education experience and preparation, family background, and individual

factors. Education and experience as a professional for African American male athletes comes out of, but is not limited to, early childhood teachings, unqualified teachers, rigor of high school curriculum, and strategies taught to prepare them for academic success (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Martin, 2009). Family background refers to resources of family support, parents' academic achievement, and rearing in socioeconomic placement.

According to Cooper (2014), African American male athletes who come from low socioeconomic situations on average are not prepared for postsecondary education. A high percentage (65%) of African American male athletes from low-income backgrounds or neighborhoods and who are first generation college students are less likely to be prepared and ready for college, financially and academically (S. Davis, 2016). This 65% of athletes alone creates the family to assist the African American male athlete the best way they can, and many times this results in very little help due to lack of knowledge of resources and tools needed for higher learning institutions (Palmer et al., 2014). The individual attributes that contribute to African American male athletes becoming professional include their chosen sport and level of competition, which are considered noncognitive factors (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011).

Harrison et al. (2015) suggested African American male athletes are influenced by peers and instant gratification of materials and possessions, and often do not stay focused to maintain longevity of assets or create long-term financial freedom. Beamon's (2012) qualitative study of former professional and college students discovered that many African American male athletes still view themselves as athletes instead of career or professional workers. According to Beamon (2012), this is called *identity foreclosure*. S. Davis (2016) stated that this happens when African American male athletes have committed to an identity (e. g., athlete) before they have engaged or participated in other identities. This identity foreclosure also explains many of the issues that

African American male athletes experience in the areas of academic success, career maturity, career aspirations, and socialization of the sport they have chosen as a professional (Beamon, 2012). Research on African American male athletes and academic success has been limited to a small sample and has yielded limited evidence or theoretical frameworks, implying that the African American male athlete only sees himself as a professional athlete with no other career aspirations (Cooper, 2014; S. Davis, 2016; Gaston-Gayles, 2014, & Glass, 2015).

According to Deci and Ryan (2002), intrinsic motivation for African American male athletes encompasses confidence and competence but diminishes when it is disrupted by negative environmental factors. Such negative influences may cause stress. These stresses could include academic eligibility, college acceptance of peers, exceeding academic expectations of their institution, and the desire to make the dean's list (Rushin, 2016). Glass (2015) suggested that African American male athletes who have aspired to become a professional athlete have done so willing to sacrifice almost everything. However, African American male athletes often feel constrained in career options due to not having internships or needed conversations while attending a university or college (Hamlet, 2012). Efforts to develop engaging and safe conversations about careers and viable options for African American male athletes while attending a university or college will yield positive outcomes for African American males in their academic achievement (Colon, 2014). African American male athletes in their institutions of higher learning, though sometimes paid in full athletically, may still experience areas of concern regarding their academic achievement.

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

The term *methods* means *ways*, based on the original Greek meaning (van Manen, 1990). *Methodology*, with the suffix *-ology* indicating a study of something, is a study of these ways.

Research has two distinct methods: (a) quantitative—based on statistics and (b) qualitative—based on description and narration. Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, and Sorensen (2006) noted quantitative research usually involves large sample populations, with a goal of providing statistical significance to support a hypothesis about a particular research focus. Conversely, Ary et al. (2006) described qualitative research as more analytical in nature and utilizing smaller sample size. Creswell (2013) suggested the sample size of participants in a qualitative study should range from five to 25 to capture the heart of the experience. An effective design in qualitative research is one where all the components work cohesively (Maxwell, 2012). Qualitative research has several designs with grounded theory, case studies, and phenomenology being a few. Qualitative research for case studies involves various forms of materials, perspectives, and personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). Case studies may be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory and the researcher may bring different assumptions (Yin, 2014). In explanatory case studies researchers seek to answer ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions focus on phenomena within the contexts of real-life situations.

One of the qualitative approaches considered for this study was a phenomenological design, which concentrates on a shared experience within a group of individuals from a psychological and philosophical standpoint (Creswell, 2013). Other research designs considered for this study included a mixed-method design and survey research design. In mixed-method research, closed-ended questions are compared to numerical data, which may not align cohesively (Stake, 2013). Survey research designs collect data about a target audience, which allows for errors that limit the accuracy of results (Adams & Lawrence, 2014). These designs would not have afforded an in-depth exploration of the personal and lived experiences of African

American male athletes who have been influenced by sports while pursuing a college degree. Case studies focus on comprehending and determining new concepts (Merriam, 2015).

An explanatory case study provided an effective way to understand the lived experiences of African American male athletes concerning their experiences in sports while pursuing a college degree. Specifically, an explanatory case study is used to seek an answer or explanation to the presumed causal links of a program and the effects of program implementation (Yin, 2014). A single case study is often used to pursue an explanatory purpose (Yin, 2014). An explanatory case study offered an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, especially when the phenomenon and context have no clear boundaries (Yin, 2014). This design was appropriate for this study, so the researcher could find within the real-life context an explanation of the effect of sports participation on academic achievement of African American male collegiate athletes.

### **Synthesis of Research**

Throughout the literature review, I explored multiple authors who published research in peer-reviewed journals. Through this examination, I established a synthesis of research summaries and connecting different resources while pulling together information to answer a question or construct an argument (Adam & Lawrence, 2014; Shenton, 2004; Stake, 2013; Wolcott, 2009). I identified authors who used quantitative and qualitative studies concerning how sports participation impacts African American male collegiate athletes while pursuing a college degree (Beamon, 2012; Beamon & Bell, 2012; Colon, 2014; Cooper, 2014; S. Davis, 2016; Gaston-Gayles, 2014; Glass, 2015; Harper et al., 2013; Harrison et al., 2015; Rushin, 2016; Stodolska et al., 2014).



The administrators of the NCAA (2016) reported that over 8 million high school athletes are in the United States. African American male athletes make up over 6% of football players and over 3% of basketball players at Division I schools (NCAA, 2016). In a poll conducted by Glass (2015), over 30% of African American male athletes believed they had a good chance of becoming a professional athlete. However, according to NCAA (2016), less than 1% will play professional football or basketball. This, in turn, leaves most African American male athletes in a quandary about what to do and where they can work, and most of all, feeling concern for their academic underachievement (Rushin, 2016).

African American male athletes and their educational pursuits may have been altered due to the participation in sports. According to Colon (2011) and Kent (2014), socialization assists male African American athletes to determine values, norms, and behaviors. This socialization begins within the home and extends to the world that African American male athletes encounter (Eitzen & Sage, 2009). Harrison et al. (2015) suggested that this socialization is led by peer influence. This socialization can create an identity confusion that is either embraced or neglected (Meyers, 2009). McCray, Beachum, and Yawn (2015) and Thompson and Davis (2013) posited that participation in sports increases the likelihood that African American male athletes will finish high school and achieve academic success.

African American male athletes are displaced out of the traditional classroom for a variety of reasons. According to Lee and Rawls (2015), African American male athletes make up a high percentage of special education classes and are underrepresented in gifted and talented classes. Additionally, the NAEP (2016) reported that 50% of African American male seniors in high school scored below *proficient in reading* on standardized tests. Glass (2015) reported that sports have a positive effect on grades and attendance for African American male athletes. The

positive effects associated with African American male athletes may include better attendance, less suspensions, less truancy, and a higher connectedness to the school (Glass, 2015). The NCES (2016) suggested that African American male athletes are still dropping out of high school at a rate of 10%. According to Cooper (2014) and Cowan Pitre (2014) this 10% could come from the notion that African American male athletes are not connected to the school, have a high mobility rate, and have low academic self-esteem. Harradine et al. (2014) also offered the explanation that African American male athletes do not have the time to concentrate on schoolwork, thus resulting in an academic shortfall.

African American male athletes have a strong desire for immediate success. Research has indicated that African American male athletes place a high value on athletics when compared to academic success or achievement (Beamon & Bell, 2006). According to Eitzen and Sage (2009), African American male athletes begin to play sports at an early age and thus appear to specialize in athletics. S. Davis (2016), Glass, (2015), Harrison et al. (2015), and Rushin (2016) suggested that African American male athletes, because of low socioeconomic rearing, depend on sports to gain social capital. The social capital of the African American male athlete cannot reach full potential without commitment and self-determination (Harper et al., 2013; Harrison et al., 2015). According to Harradine et al. (2014) and Lee and Rawls (2015), the inner drive of potential and self-determination are influenced by the memorable messages sent by the media, coaches, peers, and parents.

These memorable messages are now being acted out in African American male athletes' college commitment. The college commitment of African American male athletes could be viewed in a variety of ways, such as finding their identity, loss of focus, or time management (Walker, Fergus, & Bryant, 2012). African American male athletes' identities are shaped and

groomed by their ability to play, start, and become successful in their sport of interest (Hamlet, 2012). The loss of focus on academic achievement could have a negative effect because the African American male athlete's focus is really on becoming a professional athlete, not obtaining high academic achievement or a college degree (Harrison et al., 2015). Time management for African American male athletes is not a new problem or isolated only to them; the concern lies in how to get better academic achievement out of them. According to S. Davis (2016), African American male athletes have all the resources necessary to manage their time, and hence, academic achievement must become a matter of importance for them.

### **Critique of Previous Research**

A critique of research objectively reviews the strengths and weaknesses of a body of literature and its applicability to practice (Adam & Lawrence, 2014). The research supporting African American male athletes and their continued growth in Division I sports and admissions into major Division I universities was substantial (Colon, 2014; Cooper, 2014; S. Davis, 2016; Glass, 2015; Harrison et al., 2015; Rushin, 2016). However, the work to understand intrinsic or extrinsic motivations for African American male athletes concerning sports participation and its impact on academic achievement in obtaining a college degree is limited.

Glass (2015) concluded that environmental, societal, peer, and family influences play a pivotal role for African American male athletes in getting into an institution of higher learning. However, research about the specific motivations for African American male athletes to achieve high academic rewards or to obtain a college degree is limited (Harradine et al., 2014). Because the research is limited, and a gap exists, the voices of current African American male athletes are needed to explain how sports participation impacts the individual athlete while pursuing the academic side of a college degree.

## Summary

African American male athletes, upon entering a university, face challenges and struggles associated with their foundation for education. African American male athletes are shaped by their identity versus role confusion stage, which offers insight into how they may perceive themselves. At this point, sports may become African American male athletes' way of finding their autonomy and taking charge of their lives (Gucciardi et al., 2014). The emphasis on accountability, responsibility, and dependability for African American male athletes takes on a new meaning, leading to a shift of focus for African American male athletes (S. Davis, 2016).

African American male athletes at this point, because of limited access to opportunity, may elevate the notion that sports are a pathway to higher socioeconomic status (Harradine et al., 2014). The media portray the image of how money can bring about power and prestige, and the idea that sports can offer a way out of stressful financial situations. This image often sways African American male athletes to lean toward sports as the way out instead of academics as the leveling tool for such concerns (Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2015). According to Glass (2015), the aspiration to become a professional athlete for African American males has come at the expense of their education. Collectively, these factors may influence the identity of African American male athletes and their focus on obtaining a college degree, even though they have adequate opportunity to accomplish such a task.

Through the lens of SFT, we can understand how African American male athletes are influenced by a society set up with socioeconomic structures. Utilizing the nigrescence model of Black identity shows that African American male athletes adjust their norms and behaviors based on their new identities. Finally, with SDT, the African American male athlete realizes that his self-determination underlies all his achievements. These theories play a part in the African

American male athlete's perception of acquiring success. Comprehending the short lifespan of a professional athlete is critical for African American male athletes. This is the time African American male athletes may reflect on their professional ambitions and educational inquiry (Colon, 2014).

Realizing the importance of academics and its long-term applicability remains priceless for African American male athletes, as it pertains to their commitment to learning and obtaining their college degree (Cooper, 2014). The research of Harradine et al. (2014) discussing how African American male athletes utilized sports to achieve higher socioeconomic status, S. Davis (2016) revealing how African American male athletes strived for upward mobility through sports, Gaston-Gayles (2014) exploring academic and athletic motivation, Gucciardi et al. (2014) discussing how African American male athletes use sports as a way for autonomy, and Rushin (2016) addressing sports participation and grade point average, all assisted in developing the research question. Despite such research, none offered a voice from African American male athletes pertaining to their view of sports participation on academic achievement. Within Chapter 3, I will introduce my study to explore how sports participation impacts the academic achievement of African American male collegiate athletes.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

Academic efforts are aimed to address students' educational concerns at public and private school institutions for the last 50 years (Glass, 2015). However, only in the last 25 years have these efforts shifted toward African American male athletes (S. Davis, 2016). According to Glass (2015), while a large percentage of African American male athletes plan to become a professional athlete, only a small fraction of athletes attain this goal. The problem is a disconnection between academics and how collegiate sports participation impacts the academic achievement of African American male athletes.

The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation among African American male collegiate athletes impacts their academic achievement. In this chapter, I discuss the research question, my role as the researcher, the research design, participant selection/logic, procedures for participant recruitment, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, limitations and delimitations, internal validity, and ethical procedures.

#### **Research Question**

The research question for this study was:

1. How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes?

#### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation impacts the pursuit of academic achievement among African American male collegiate athletes. Qualitative research for case studies involves various forms of materials, perspectives, and personal experiences (Creswell, 2013). An effective design in qualitative research is one where all the components work cohesively (Maxwell, 2012). One of the qualitative approaches

considered for this study was a phenomenological design, which concentrates on a shared experience within a group of individuals from a psychological and philosophical standpoint (Creswell, 2013).

Other research designs considered for this study included a mixed-method design and survey research design. In mixed-method research, closed-ended questions are compared to numerical data, which may not align cohesively (Stake, 2013). Survey research designs collect data about a target audience, which allows for errors that limit the accuracy of results (Adams & Lawrence, 2014). These designs would not have afforded an in-depth exploration of the personal and lived experiences of African American male athletes who have been influenced by sports while pursuing a college degree. Case studies focus on comprehending and determining new concepts (Merriam, 2015).

An explanatory case study provided an effective way to understand the lived experiences of African American male athletes concerning their experiences in sports while pursuing a college degree. Specifically, an explanatory case study is used to seek an answer or explanation to the presumed causal links of a program and the effects of program implementation (Yin, 2014). A single case study is often used to pursue an explanatory purpose (Yin, 2014). An explanatory case study offered an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context, especially when the phenomenon and context have no clear boundaries (Yin, 2014). This single case study was aimed to answer the research question: How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes ? Such a question yielded a response from African American male collegiate athletes because they offered lived experiences about how sports participation impacted their academic achievement.

## **Research Population and Sampling Method**

The research population within this explanatory case study consisted of 12 current African American male athletes from one major university in the Southern United States. According to Stake (2013), a case study revolves around individuals or a specific group. The research population consists of over five different collegiate sports offered to male and female athletes, a population of over 450 student athletes, and over 100 African American male athletes. To assist in the study, I reached out to the Letterman's Association. This association operates to bestow recognition of meeting criteria for successful varsity sports participation through achieving goals, exceeding expectations, and earning a degree while promoting closer relationships and professional enrichment. The Letterman's Association reached out to the research population who met criteria and graduated within the last 4 years (2014–2018).

### **Participant Selection Logic**

Determining the appropriate number of participants in a study is critical to providing the data necessary to help answer the research question. I recruited 12 African American male athletes from a major Division I university in the South. An example of a case study with fewer participants is the Locke (2011) case study of African American collegiate male athletes with six participants. Cooper (2014) utilized five field participants in a case study concerning the psychological factors associated with African American male athletes. Creswell (2013) suggested the sample size of participants in a study should range from five to 25 to capture the heart of the experience.

The sampling method I used was selecting from the individuals responding to the recruitment email expressing interest in participating in the study for either face-to-face interviews or a focus group. I separated the first seven emails received to be the participants



selected for the face-to-face interview, and the next five emails for the focus group participants. I sent each of the face-to-face interview participants and the focus group participants the consent form (see Appendix A) and a copy of the recruitment email and script (see Appendix B). I gave the participants an explanation of the interview and focus group process, the maximum length of the interview and focus group, and the reason for recording the interview and focus group. Participants completed the consent form and returned via email or at the study site. I recruited 15 total participants were recruited for the study. I used 12 and chose three as alternates in case one of the 12 chose not to participate in the interview or focus group. I was available by phone or email to respond to any additional inquires, concerns, or reservations. After the participants signed the forms, I made copies of the form. Then, I returned the forms to each participant of the study.

### **Procedures for Recruitment**

To begin recruitment for this explanatory case study, I obtained approval from the Concordia University–Portland Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the approval from the IRB was granted, I contacted the director of the Letterman’s Association for approval to collect data at the study site, which has African American male athletes who participate in sports at the university. Next, I explained the purpose of the explanatory case study to the director of the Letterman’s Association. All participants were members of the Letterman’s Association; the Director of the Letterman’s Association contacted via email only graduates from 2014–2018 who were African American male members, providing information about this study and asking for volunteer participants. The target sample size for this case study consisted of 12 participants and three alternates. The alternates would only have been used if a participant dropped out of the volunteer study.

I accepted the first seven men who responded to the director's email as a participant for a one-on-one interview, and the following five men who responded to the director's email as members of a focus group. When a participant stated an interest in participating in this study, I contacted the participant via email, which he had shared in his communication. This population often communicates via email and this study gave participants an opportunity to share their experiences. If needed, I was prepared to repeat this process at two other universities until I received the total number needed for the face-to-face interviews and focus group.

When I received an email from an interested Letterman's Association member, I replied by sending the consent form (see Appendix A) and asking for a time to host a one-on-one telephone call. During this conversation, I discussed the consent form and answered any concerns or questions. All participants who agreed to participate in the explanatory case study were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. During the interviews, participants were expected to answer questions about how sports participation impacted their academic achievement (see Appendix C).

After the completion of the face-to-face interviews, I hosted a focus group with the remaining participants. I asked a different set of questions from those of the face-to-face interviews in the focus group (see Appendix D). The focus group met 1 week after the face-to-face interviews were completed and answered questions about how sports participation impacted their academic achievement.

### **Instrumentation**

Instruments are tools vital in any research case study (Stake, 2010). The self-designed instruments used in this explanatory case study consisted of interviews and a focus group

semistructured questions. The participants answered open-ended questions pertaining to how collegiate sports participation impacted their academic achievement.

### **Interviews: Individual and Group**

The self-designed questions were based on the theories of Parsons (1970), Cross (1971), and Deci and Ryan (2000; see Appendices C and D). The face-to-face interviews and focus group questions were based on information presented by Parsons (1970), particularly his discussion of how individuals seek out a higher socioeconomic status to gain notoriety in society. This coincided with Cross (1971), who offered insight into African American male athletes who go through various stages of becoming Black, all while having determination to become successful, utilizing his own definition of how collegiate sports participation impacted academic achievement in obtaining a college degree (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### **Data Collection**

The collection and analysis of data are two of the most important steps in research (Yin, 2014). I collected the data for this explanatory case study through questions from the semistructured face-to-face interviews and the focus group. The goal of all in-depth interviewing is to obtain an understanding of the lived experiences of people and the meaning they take from those experiences (Stake, 2013). In the data collection process, the strength of face-to-face interviews is that they allow the researcher to probe for explanations of responses, identify body language, and achieve a comprehensive understanding. The weakness of face-to-face interviews includes time consumption and that the interviewee can deliver biased responses (Stake, 2013).

In the data collection process, I recorded the both the interviews and the focus group, paying close attention to the setting, making sure that I asked participants to repeat statements, while being as accurate as possible. Also, I was monitoring participants' body language to the

questions and atmosphere. For the anecdotal notes, I was writing brief and exact notes on my clipboard; writing the number associated with the participant who was speaking and making side notes to other participants chiming in. Along with those specific notes, I took video recordings of the face-to-face interviews and the focus group so I could transcribe the African American male collegiate athletes' lived, cognitive, reflective experiences. These interviews were completed with one participant at a time for the face-to-face interviews, and in a group of five later for the focus group. I completed observational and anecdotal notes throughout the study during the face-to-face interviews and the focus group.

The first seven participants completed the face-to-face interviews with semistructured, open-ended questions. The face-to-face interviews lasted no longer than 45 minutes and member checking lasted no longer than 10 minutes (Shenton, 2004; Stake, 2013). The participants discussed the impact of sports participation on academic achievement during the face-to-face interview at a private secured place at the community center.

## **Interviews**

As the researcher, I assigned random numeric pseudonyms to all participants. I recorded all interviews and the focus group using a digital recorder. I met in person with the first seven participants at a given time for each individual interview. The interview times were 12:00 p.m. (noon), 2:00 p.m., 4:00 p.m., and 6:00 p.m. The times were offered again after two days to complete interviews, and I offered make-up times for those who had missed their interview. The face-to-face interviews lasted 45 minutes per participant. During the interviews, participants answered questions about how sports participation impacted academic achievement.

I conducted the research in a private study room at an off-campus community center. This facility was open to the public and available on a first-come basis. I reserved the room in

advance using my name only. The nature of this explanatory case study was sensitive; therefore, I reiterated the consent form (see Appendix A) and ensured all information was kept confidential and secured in a safe place. Participants disclosed information in a relationship of trust (S. Davis, 2016). Data were made confidential to ensure the information collected would not identify the individual from whom the response came (Rushin, 2016). Participants were asked questions without a rush to response. This allowed participants time to ponder on past messages and experiences in relation to the questions. Each participant did not exceed 45 minutes for face-to-face interviews.

All individuals agreeing to participate in the explanatory case study were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. The pseudonym came from a random number between 1 and 12. As the researcher, I assigned random pseudonyms to all participants. I then met with each participant at his given time. All participants were given numbers based on their responses to email. The first response was given the number one, the second the number two, the third the number three, and so on, until the last response from number 12 was given the number 12 completing the process.

### **Focus Group**

When I completed all face-to-face interviews, I scheduled the focus group in order to hear in a group setting the different lived experiences of African American collegiate male athletes. I used the focus group method because it provided insight into how the athletes thought, while providing a deeper understanding from their various viewpoints of the phenomena being studied. Focus groups encourage group interactions from participants that did not occur during the face-to-face interviews. The strength of a focus group was time management and

participants' reactions to each other, while the disadvantages are that it is impersonal, difficult to control, and may have a dominating individual (Stake, 2013).

The focus group was scheduled 1 week after face-to-face interviews were completed. The focus group time was 2:00 p.m. and lasted 90 minutes. The focus group met in a private study room that was reserved in my name only. I reiterated the consent form (see Appendix A) and ensured all information was kept confidential and secured in a safe place. To allow for order in responses and proper identification of participant voices, I introduced a talking stick. This talking stick represented who could talk at the time and created some order to prevent everyone talking at one time. When permitted, the talking stick was put down to allow everyone a chance to speak freely to respond to a question. The focus group was also allowed proper time to articulate all questions with a pause and reading the question twice. This process was done with every question until the completion of the focus group. At the end of the focus group, all participants were asked if any questions needed restatement prior to dismissal from focus group.

I transcribed all face-to-face interview and focus group recordings. Any significant statement made by a participant during an interview was noted and annotated. I recorded interviews with a handheld voice recorder device, then transcribed each interview and listened to each one several times to ensure the accuracy of my transcription. I completed a transcript review which, allows participants an opportunity to reflect on the interview, volunteer information during the playback process, record their responses, assess the accuracy of data, and summarize preliminary results of data (Merriam, 2015).

### **Identification of Attributes**

The individual attributes that contribute to African American males becoming professional athletes include their chosen sport and level of competition, which are considered

noncognitive factors (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011). Yet in this study I also examined the attribute of academic success. A graduation gap exists between African American male athletes and both Asian male athletes and Caucasian male athletes (NAEP, 2016). Research on African American male athletes and academic success has been limited to a small sample and has yielded limited evidence or theoretical frameworks, implying that the African American male athlete only sees himself as a professional athlete with no other career aspirations (Cooper, 2014; S. Davis, 2016; Gaston-Gayles, 2014, & Glass, 2015). McCray et al. (2015) and Thompson and Davis (2013) posited that participation in sports increases the likelihood that African American male athletes will finish high school and achieve academic success.

*African American male collegiate graduate:* A male, 22–26 years of age, collegiate graduate (2015–2018), of African descent, and ancestry who is a United States citizen or person relating to any part of the African continent or its peoples, languages, or culture; a synonym is Black male (Hamlet, 2012).

*Athlete:* An African American male who has participated or participates in a major Division I university sport or professional sport—i.e., basketball or football (Harrison et al., 2015).

*National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA):* A member-led organization dedicated to the well-being and lifelong success of college athletes (NCAA, 2016).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Upon completion of the semistructured face-to-face interviews and the focus group, both sets of data were transcribed from the video recordings, and the researcher enforced the transcription review process, including inviting each participant to review the transcript and offer

changes or modifications as needed. A hard copy of each transcript was printed, and the data analysis process began utilizing open, axial, and selective coding.

To begin the data analysis process, I transcribed all interviews and the focus group conversation. When I completed the transcription process, I sent everyone their transcript via email asking for the participant to review for accuracy as a transcript review step. During this transcript review, I allowed 1 week to check for accuracy and return. I then searched the transcripts inductively for themes and patterns while making sure the focus groups and face-to-face interview data were compared for similarity and lack of similarity, or triangulation. For the identification of themes, I assembled a set of codes for each theme. Coding is the first step in data analysis that allows the researcher to break down the conceptualization of data (Merriam, 2015). For my study, a code was a word or short phrase that symbolically assigned a meaning for a portion of data (Stake, 2013).

I used open coding at the beginning of the analysis to distinguish concepts and categories, which assisted in forming the basic units of analysis from the data (Merriam, 2015). Open coding consisted of breaking down the data into headings, concepts, or subheadings (see Appendix E). Another coding process I used in my research was axial coding. Axial coding is categorizing and grouping like properties from data (Merriam, 2015). During axial coding, I strategically reassembled data that were spilt in the initial coding process, which then puts them into categories (Stake, 2013). Categorizing is placing data in specific, general, or comprehensive divisions so that the researcher can discern data. Through axial coding, I confirmed the concepts and categories while rereading the text, and explored how the concepts and categories were related (Stake, 2013).



After open and axial coding, I utilized selective coding with a Word program on my computer to decipher patterns. Selective coding is when a theme is developed from the study (Merriam, 2015). I also conducted constant comparison, when newly collected data and codes were compared to existing data and codes as themes or findings emerged from the data through interpretation (Stake, 2013). The interpretation of such data from coding was based on a generated construct that symbolized or translated data for later purposes of constructing themes, categories, and patterns to support the analytic reduction of data (Vogt, Vogt, Gardner, & Haeffele, 2014). In other words, a central category or proposition was developed through interpretation from the participant responses (Merriam, 2015). This analysis led to the production of a narrative. Creswell (2013) suggested that a narrative account allows the researcher to use multiple interpretations of evidence for results where the participants hold multiple perspectives and diverse views on a topic.

### **Limitations of the Research Design**

According to Maxwell (2012), limitations are characteristics of a design or methodology which impact or influence the interpretation of the findings from the research. According to Yin (2014) limitations of an explanatory case study approach provide an in-depth perceptual and experiential understanding of the research question, which in this case was regarding how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts academic achievement. Although the methodology employed a set of brief questions for face-to-face interviews, limitations existed within the study and findings. The chosen African American male athletes for this study were collegiate athletes (basketball or football) or those who had graduated with a college degree within the last 3 years (2015–2018) from a major Division I school.

The responses from the research questions were heard from the voices of current African American male collegiate athletes. The essence of the themes, understanding, and experiences were limited to those voices. The study did not include males from elementary, junior high school, high school, or female African American athletes at any level. Limitations included African American male athletes who had time restraints, participants who were not honest in their responses, and participants who stated they had a college degree or graduated yet had not done so.

Another limitation for this case study was my background and viewpoint as an African American male and former Division I collegiate athlete. My view on academics, when I was a collegiate athlete, was that African American male athletes come into college ill-prepared for higher learning. My viewpoint, as it pertains to the college or university, was that, for me, it was about making money. I safeguarded against and prevented bias during the questions and interviews by not revealing my past affiliations or history. I also created a personal journal that I kept private and secured in a locked area in my office. In this journal, I kept my private thoughts. I did not interview current or past friends, nor did I share my personal or professional opinion with interviewees, to limit bias.

### **Validation**

In validating steps taken, data collected, and final results in a qualitative study, the researcher must establish trustworthiness of the study. Shenton (2004) noted that trustworthiness can be established under several criteria, which include credibility and dependability. According to McMillan (2012), credibility and validity are the extent to which the data collection, data analysis, and conclusions are accurate and trustworthy.

## **Credibility**

Shenton (2004) stated, “In addressing credibility, investigators attempt to demonstrate that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being presented” (p. 63). Shenton noted that researchers need to be sure the study measures or tests what is actually intended. Shenton noted several steps that contribute to the credibility of the study, many of which I employed in this study. For example, one step in establishing credibility is the adoption of well-established research methods (Shenton, 2004). An explanatory case study design is one of the established methods of qualitative research. Another step towards credibility is when the researcher develops an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations. In this case, I as the researcher am a former African American male collegiate athlete from a Division I school, so I am familiar with the environment and culture. Shenton noted another step in credibility is member checks, which I employed with inviting the participants to review the transcripts to make sure they conveyed their true perspectives.

One more step in creditability named by Shenton is the examination of previous research, which I conducted and reported in Chapter 2. Finally, Shenton mentioned triangulation as a step in establishing credibility. According to Merriam (2015), triangulation of data requires connection from a variety of points of the study. Triangulation of data was employed as a means for correlating validity and reliability of data. Triangulation demands the connection of information from multiple data points. I compared responses to Interview Question 2 and Focus Group Question 1, Interview and Focus Group Questions 4 and 5, Interview Questions 7 and Focus Group Question 12, and Interview Question 8 and Focus Group Question 17 to equate and triangulate data throughout this explanatory case study. According to Merriam (2015), triangulation of data has an important role regarding the validity of findings.

## **Dependability**

Another step in establishing trustworthiness of a study is dependability, which Shenton (2004) described as “if the work were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and with the same participants, similar results would be obtained” (p. 71). Dependability in qualitative research is comparable to reliability in quantitative research, which requires verification through replication. This explanatory study query involved African American male collegiate athlete’s participation in a sport and how it may have impacted their academic achievement. Conducting the research in an explanatory case study allows each participant a voice to their perceptions of the impact of sport participation on their academic achievement (Yin, 2014). According to Creswell (2013) standards to assess the quality of a phenomenological research include evidence of a phenomenon, communication of the themes or categories removed from the data, and unintended action of the researcher. This explanatory case study includes a description of the sample, data collection and analysis, coding procedures, and a report of common themes deduced in the data.

## **Expected Findings**

When I began this study I was not projecting ahead about what I might find. The research question was truly a question in my mind that I wanted to learn from the participants. Perhaps based on my memory from my time in collegiate sports I may have expected to find that African American male athletes would speak negatively about sports and coaches. Furthermore, I may have projected that African American male athletes would say sports negatively impacted their academics. I expected the results of this study to demonstrate that African American male athletes understood the ramifications of not taking education seriously when attending a college or university, while playing a sport and trying to obtain a college degree. However, I literally

went into the study intrigued by any results. So I was excited to discover the three main themes that emerged from the data: (a) participants did not feel like regular students; (b) participants had to deal with long days; and (c) participants frequently mentioned the conflict of money taking priority over academics.

### **Ethical Issues**

As the principal investigator and researcher within this case study, I followed all procedures and protocols, upholding ethical standards and expectations. All ethical concerns in this case study were addressed and assessed according to standards for conducting research in the social sciences, as prescribed in the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. As part of the ethical procedures, I offered each participant the option to withdraw from the study when signing the consent form, at the end of the interview, and at the end of the acceptance of the accuracy of the transcription.

I interviewed seven participants face-to-face and five participants in the focus group, all of whom signed an informed consent form, which indicated risks, purpose, time requirements, guidelines, and benefits for the participation in the study. I conducted the face-to-face and focus group interviews in a private setting and employed pseudonym numbers to ensure confidentiality of participants. I recorded and transcribed the face-to-face and focus group interviews. I immediately locked the transcriptions in a secure file cabinet at my home and will discard them after 3 years following the completion of the study. The final step for ensuring sound ethical research was when I included in the appendices a statement of original research (see Appendix F).

## **Conflict of Interest Assessment**

For this study conflict of interest could have allowed the face-to-face interviews to become a threat to internal validity because as I am an African American male and the participant may have assumed that I understood his experience or knew what he was talking about. This presumption could have led to the participant leaving out needed detail or not sharing an experience. Interview bias could have offered a threat in the internal validity if I finished sentences for the participant or transcribed inaccurate data. My past experience as an African American male athlete would have offered a threat to the internal validity if I offered insight, assisted with statements, or revealed my story to the participants. I addressed such threats by making sure I did not reveal my past to any of the participants. Maintaining an even tone with minimum to no facial expression is key when interviewing (Matsumoto, Hwang, & Frank, 2016). I made sure to ask the questions the same way throughout the face-to-face interviews and focus group, while being mindful of facial expressions or gestures. In addition, I took precautions in my approach for trustworthiness and reliability of data through member checking, rich and thick description, researcher reflection, and triangulation.

## **Researcher's Position**

While I am not in a position of authority over any of the participants, I was in their role in the past as an African American male athlete. In some ways, I expected the results of this study to demonstrate that African American male athletes understood the ramifications of not taking education seriously when attending a college or university, while playing a sport and trying to obtain a college degree. According to Merriam (2015) and Stake (2013), human bias is impossible to preclude in a case study. As a former Division I athlete, African American male, and strong believer of the power of academics, I am aware that I needed to limit and

counterbalance my biases so as not to unduly interfere with or influence the participants' responses, and in how I analyzed their data.

I attempted to limit my biases by keeping a personal journal. Those biases included, for example, viewing sports as having negative impacts on athletes' academic achievement while pursuing a college degree. Another bias I had was the belief that education is too often a second thought for African American male athletes. A further bias was the belief that African American male athletes are not properly prepared for higher learning institutions.

To deal with my biases and counterbalance how I collected and analyzed data, I verified my transcriptions with all participants after completion of the face-to-face interviews and at the end of the focus group. Also, to counterbalance my biases, I paid attention to how I asked questions and my facial expressions to participants' responses. This was done through careful practice with past athletes, inquiring about how I ask questions and my facial expressions. Another way I counterbalanced my biases was to not ask questions about high school preparation for college or high school grade point average. Finally, when collecting and analyzing data, I clarified all words of concern, and did not offer or imply past experiences as an African American male collegiate athlete. The intended results were consistent with the narrative from the brief questions and face-to-face interviews.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 3, I presented the methodology for this study. The problem is a disconnection between academics and how collegiate sports participation impacts the academic achievement of African American male athletes. The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation among African American male collegiate athletes impacts their academic

achievement. The research question guiding this study was: How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes?

To attempt to answer this question, I chose an explanatory case study qualitative research design, to help me discover the perspectives of the participants in the case of collegiate athletics and their impact on academics. In conducting this study I collected data from seven African American male collegiate athletes in face-to-face interviews, and from another five African American male collegiate athletes in a focus group. I recruited these participants through email with the help of the Letterman's Association at the chosen site university.

This study has both delimitations and limitations. I delimited the study to 12 African American male athletes, conducted at only one Division I university in the South. Although I did not delimit the study to specific sports, the only sports considered in this case study were basketball and football due to the relatively large percentage of African American male athletes who participate in these two sports. Finally, the study results were limited because I did not observe specific interactions of coaches, professors, or classrooms with any of the African American male athletes who participated in the study.

The data collection process, analysis, ethical procedures, and documented evidence were reviewed for compliance purposes, and all are being stored in a secure location to maintain confidentiality. The data obtained from the brief questions and face-to-face interviews elicited the opinions of current African American male athletes. The data analysis was designed to lead to relevant findings and recommendations for parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators who aim to understand how collegiate sports participation among African American male athletes impacts their academic achievement. In Chapter 4, I will look at the data analysis and the results



associated with the research question of how sports participation impacts the academic achievement of African American male collegiate athletes.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

In this explanatory case study, I explored the experiences and reflections of African American male collegiate athletes concerning sports participation and how it impacted their academic achievement. S. Davis (2016), Glass (2015), and Rushin (2016) show the correlation between sports participation and graduation rates among African American male athletes. No studies to date offer a platform for African American male collegiate athletes to describe sports participation and the impact it has on their academic achievement. I analyzed the qualitative responses of the participants. According to Yin (2014), an explanatory case study seeks an answer or explanation to causal links while offering an effective way to understand the lived experiences of the participants. I conducted seven in-depth interviews and one focus group of five participants with former Division I, African American male athletes. I begin Chapter 4 by providing a description of the sample population, the research methodology and data analysis, and the research results, themes, and summary of results. The research results highlighted commonalities in the experiences and reflections of the study participants. I conclude Chapter 4 with a summary and prelude to Chapter 5.

### **Description of the Sample**

I recruited participants for this study from a mass email sent by the Director of the Letterman's Association at the university site. The participants of this study resided in the Southwest United States. All participants were African American male athletes who had participated in a Division I collegiate sport. All participants had obtained a college degree from a university and this case study was open to all African American male athletes who obtained their degrees from 2015–2018; 100% of the participants were past football players. A total of 12 participants contributed to this case study. The face-to-face interviews consisted of seven

participants, while five additional participants were involved in the focus group. Table 1 details the participants' age, marital status, career, and degree. The age range for the participants was 22–25 years old, six were married and six were single. Careers include entrepreneurship, education, criminal justice, and motor vehicle rental distribution agents. Currently, only 1 participant was unemployed. Degrees range from Communications, Psychology, Kinesiology, to Social Work. The criteria for this explanatory case study included: male, African American, 22–25 years old, and obtained a college degree between 2015 and 2018.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Career	Degree
1	25	Single	Store manager	Communication
2	23	Married	Juvenile probation officer	Social Work
3	24	Married	Teacher	Psychology
4	23	Married	Personal trainer	Kinesiology and Health Promotions
5	22	Single	Unemployed	Philosophy
6	25	Married	Entrepreneur	Kinesiology and Health Promotions
7	24	Married	Juvenile probation officer	Communications
8	24	Single	Parks and recreation	Social Work
9	23	Single	Substitute teacher	General Studies
10	24	Single	Local truck company	Accounting
11	22	Single	Local car rental agent	Communications
12	23	Married	Mental health therapist	Social Work

**Methodology and Analysis**

I recruited the participant sample of 12 African American men through an email blast from the Director of the Letterman's Association. I recorded the needed information and scheduled appointments. The needed information included verifying email, giving a numeric pseudonym to participants for confidentiality, asking for a second email for emergency contact, confirmed criteria met, and check mark next to number for acceptance of consent form over

phone. I then called the Director of the Letterman's Association and requested an email blast asking all others to cease because the study had reached the maximum participants. Prospective participants were chosen because of their expertise in being an African American male collegiate athlete who had obtained a college degree while playing at a Division I university. I then assigned participants a number between 1 and 15. Another three participants agreed to become alternates if needed. The first seven respondents became the interviewees, while the next five were utilized in the focus group. The three alternates agreed to either be interviewed or to be a part of the focus group. Interview participants were assigned numbers 1 through 7, and the focus group 8 through 12.

Face-to-face interviews were held at mutually agreed upon private area and were video recorded. Transcriptions were provided to the participants within 36 hours for review. No changes were required. I held one video-recorded focus group session, transcribed the recording, and conducted member checks via email by all participants. After member checking, no changes were required.

After each video-recorded, face-to-face interview, I transcribed the data within 36 hours. The transcripts of each interview were sent to each participant as a transcript review. The focus group was also video recorded and a transcript review was implemented for these participants too. For data analysis I started with open coding based on the recommendation of Merriam (2015) to distinguish concepts and categories. This also, consisted of breaking down the data into headings and subheadings. After establishing the headings and subheadings, I employed axial coding to strategically reassemble the data that were split in the initial coding process and put them into categories (Stake, 2013). In axial coding, categorizing is placing data into divisions so the researcher can discern the data. During this step I confirmed the data while rereading the text,

exploring how the concepts and categories were related. The last process of coding the data was selective. With selective coding, as Merriam (2015) suggested, I developed a theme with the removal of repetition and retaining of essential statements. I conducted constant comparison, when new data chunks and codes are compared to existing chunks and codes to check for new themes or categories. I consolidated a detailed description from the collected data, and then compared the data to assist in identifying the unique experiences of the participants.

### **Coding Analysis**

Responses from semistructured Interview Question 2 and Focus Group Question 1 resulted in three open codes coinciding with the research question, which asked: How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes? Common open codes represented across the semistructured questions and related to the research question included: (a) my typical day was not like other students, (b) my day was long, and (c) with my day being so late, academics really became an afterthought. The three open codes were narrowed into one axial code: with many responsibilities as a student-athlete, it appeared that coursework was secondary (see Appendix E).

Responses from semistructured Interview Question 5 and Focus Group Question 4 resulted in three open codes coinciding with the research question. Common open codes represented across the semistructured questions and related to the research question included: (a) never had an impediment because of sports to academics; (b) had to learn how to manage time; and (c) missing practice had a consequence, however, missing a test or class did not. The three open codes were narrowed into one axial code: a synopsis of the responses from the African American male athletes made it appear that sports helped their academics (see Appendix E).

Responses from semistructured Interview Question 7 and Focus Group Question 12 resulted in one open code coinciding with the research question. The common open code represented across the semistructured questions and related to the research question was: frustration based on the assumption that all African American males were athletes. The one open code was narrowed into one axial code: a summation of the data collected from the African American male athletes suggested a search for personal reward as motivation. The themes from the central research question are discussed in the research results (see Appendix E).

Responses from semistructured Interview Question 8 and Focus Group Question 17 resulted in two open codes coinciding with the research question. Common open codes represented across the semistructured questions and related to the research question included: (a) treated like all African American male athletes only know football, and (b) special treatment for playing football from the community. The two open codes were narrowed into one axial code: a brief overview of the responses from the African American male athletes made it appear that controlling emotions was on forefront of thought. The themes from the central research question are discussed in the research results (see Appendix E).

### **Summary of the Findings**

Data from the semistructured interviews were analyzed according to the study's main research question: How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes? Themes, supporting details, and narratives that described African American male collegiate athletes' perceptions regarding the impact of sports participation on academic achievement were summarized. The following results offer an understanding of the phenomenon studied.

**Research Question: How Does Sports Participation Impact the Pursuit of Academic Achievement Among African American Collegiate Male Athletes?**

**Interview Question 2 and Focus Group Question 1: Describe your typical day.**

Participants' perceptions were examined regarding a typical day. The reflection of such a question revealed: (a) the athletes' typical day was not like other students, (b) they had long days, and (c) academics became undervalued.

*Typical day not like other students.* Overall, participants perceived their typical day was not like other students who simply attended the university. Having to blend academics and athletics while attending a higher learning institution is hard and difficult in the first year. Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 expressed their typical day was so confusing that, at times, they would find themselves going to practice instead of class even though practice would not start for hours (personal interview; focus group). Participants 5 and 9 discussed their typical day as overwhelming and very stressful (personal interview; focus group). Talking about how a typical day for an African American male athlete differs because they have to deal with stereotypes for being African American, a male, and an athlete while maintaining their composure during difficult moments. They experienced looks from other students and professors, and when they finally got to practice all the coaches seemed to care about was football, not how our day was as a person. This is what makes "our" typical day not like other students (Participants 2, 5, 6, 7, personal interview; Participants 8, 9, 10, 11, & 12, focus group). Putting together Participants 4, 8, and 11, statements, they felt as students attending the university, they had to study for tests, study film, study themselves (looking at weaknesses on the field) and study their opponents—this made their day not like other students (personal interview; focus group).

***Long days.*** Overwhelmingly, all African American male collegiate athletes agreed that their day was long. The average day mentioned was 12 to 14 hours. The athletes discussed waking up as early as 4:00 a.m. and getting back to their dorms or apartments as late as 11:00 p.m. Participant 2 reported his days were so long there were times he would wake up upset because he thought he missed practice and his workout, but the worst was the time he fell asleep during a test because his day was so long the day before (personal interview).

According to Participant 1, his days were so long everything became a blur that his football assignments for games blended with his class assignments, creating all kind of confusion at first (personal interview). The days playing football while attending a higher learning university is very challenging. What really makes it hard is the long days of class and practice. Participant 1 also voiced that a person would think that a university or the football team itself would prepare athletes for such long days (personal interview). These long days that consist of becoming bored with football, classes and coaches getting on a young persons' nerves, and even the pressures of maintaining all of the requirements of being a student-athlete.

***Academics became undervalued.*** Participants in this study concluded that academics became undervalued. Participants shared that because of having so many responsibilities, academics were often placed on the back burner or off to the side because their ability to play football is what got them into the university. Of the 12 participants, 11 reported the set -up of their football schedule compared to their class schedule leaves little room for high academic achievement but it does leave room for athletic accomplishments. According to Participant 4, academics became an afterthought the moment he realized he needed tutors to keep himself eligible to play and he was reminded by coaches—he was not recruited because of his brains (personal interview). So, at that point, 10 of the 12 participants discussed how with the negative



message they heard from coaches became a major obstacle in their academic achievement. Of all the participants, Participant 2 and 5 voiced a concern that academics became undervalued when they looked at how much money a professional football player can make compared to the average salary a person makes with a college degree (personal interview). They discussed how the average NFL player will make about \$400,000 a year when the average person with a college degree will make only \$40,000. “It was about making the most with my ability not trying to show everyone how smart I was academically” (Participant 4, personal interview).

**Interview Question 5 and Focus Group Question 4: Describe how your commitment to sports impeded your academics as African American male athletes.** All participants alluded to feeling that being a student–athlete is not the truth—they were an athlete who just so happens to be a student. As Participant 7 revealed, “Academics can only become an afterthought when you place more emphasis on meeting athletic quotas and not academic achievements” (personal interview). Participants’ perceptions were explored regarding impediments to academics and the athletes’ commitment to sports yielded responses of: (a) never had impediments to academics; (b) learning time management; and (c) consequences for missing practice or film.

***Never had impediments to academics.*** Participants did not feel they had impediments to their academics due to their sports commitment. Of the 12 participants, eight stated they never felt or had any impediment because they were more committed to their sport than to any form of academics. Several participants stated they were committed to their sport and they put their best foot forward every day. They would not change anything about their commitment and that commitment never got in the way of their academics in any way or at any time. According to Participant 5, his academics never suffered because of his commitment to his sport, nor did it

ever create a feeling of being in the way of anything. Participant 3, however, disagreed; he talked candid about how he thought it did in some form or fashion impede his academics because of his commitment to his sport. He further explained that his existence became football and he wanted to achieve the ultimate from it. Later he stated he wonders if he would have been assertive in his academics, could he have been a doctor, surgeon, or maybe a CEO of a company, if only he had placed the same energy into academics as he put into his sport. Now, he realizes that his sport commitment did, and probably for the rest of his life, impede his academic achievements (personal interview).

***Learning time management.*** All participants, when responding to the question of describing how their commitment to their sport impeded their academics, first expressed time management as a major lesson that they needed to learn. Participants mentioned how they wished they would have had someone teach them how to utilize time effectively. Participant 10 in particular voiced his opinion of how learning time management would have saved him so much time and wasted energy, “Having to figure out on your own what is important or what you need to do, compared to what you want to do” (focus group). Giving details about learning time management, he believes, would protect athletes from themselves and produce better outcomes as far as higher education graduation rates, especially for African American male athletes. He further explained, the average African American male athlete might be the first to go to college in his family. College is new to him and the routine of it is like learning a new language. If he had the proper tools and knowledge of pitfalls, things not to do, and places not to go, then he has a better chance of being successful because he is not relying on his judgement (lack of) or his new friends, freshmen, who are also learning the new expectation as a true student–athlete. Learning time management should be a mandatory tutor session for all athletes, especially

African American males. A high percentage, 83%, 10 out of 12 participants reported, time management is the one thing that taught them the most in school. They had to really suffer before they understood the importance of it and now they believe in their heart that it is truly the foundation of all failures and successes attending any college or university for an athlete.

*Consequences for missing practice or film.* All participants spoke frankly and candidly about consequences of missing practice or film. Some recalled running before and after practice. They then would come about 30 minutes late to practice, because they needed to speak to their professor about a study guide for a test, their coach's response to them was, "Do your classwork or talks during your class time." Consequences for missing practice or film always stayed on their mind because they did not want to have to come do an early morning workout then do their regular workout and then have to repeat it in the evening. "The problem is it was called a workout, but we all knew it as 60 minutes of hell" (Participant 1, personal interview). In response to this question, Participant # 9 reported, how he remembered oversleeping and missing film and had to make up the film session during one of his classes and that same day, after practice, having to do 300 yards worth of rolls and conditioning as a reminder not to do it again (focus group).

According to many of the participants, a consequence for missing practice or film was always present and understood but no one seemed to give a consequence when they missed classes, tests, and often tutoring. The code of missing practice or film and a consequence associated with it became apparent the first day of reporting to the university and with the older players reinforcing the importance of practice and film. That might explain why this issue was minuscule compared to other problems related to playing sports at a Division I university.

**Interview Question 7 and Focus Group Questions 12: As African American males on a campus with so few African American males, describe significant experiences.**

Participants' perceptions concerning significant experiences on campus as African American males were examined. The participants' responses revealed frustration based on the assumption that all African American males were athletes.

According to Participant 4, being hurried in a classroom discussion on a global topic such as conservation was very frustrating and made him feel as if he did not exist in the class or at the university (personal interview). Concerning significant experience as an African American male athlete, Participant 1 spoke on the day he sat down on a fraternity bench on campus and he looked at campus police talking with another African American male and discussing the game, telling him how good he played and the team looked really good. "The problem was the person did not play on our team" (Participant 1, personal interview). A very similar situation happened to Participant 8, who reported, he was late to class and when he walked in the classroom, the class was talking about the game, and the professor was really listening to this guy describe some plays and the thinking of the team. "The professor's reply, 'You guys continue to play hard and strong.' The guy did not ever play for our team" (Participant 8, personal interview).

All the participants discussed significant experiences on campus dealing with frustration concerning:

- students walking faster when they, as African American male athletes, walked alone
- professors looking at some of them with a "disgusted" stare
- going into quiet places on campus and having personnel tell them
  - "This is a place of study"

- “You are aware this place does not tolerate noise,”
- “Are you sure this is the place you are looking for?”
- With all this happening daily, what was frustrating the most was the feeling that we could not go and talk to any of our coaches about any of these concerns.

**Interview Question 8 and Focus Group Question 17: Describe any significant experiences related to your unique status as African American male athletes.** The participants voiced they were treated like all African American male athletes only know football and were given special treatment for playing football from the community.

*Treated like all African American male athletes only know football.* Participants’ perceptions regarding their significant experiences related to their unique status as African American athletes revealed honest, thoughtful responses. Participant 2 described how his professors and fellow classmates would only ask him questions about football or football games but never about assignments, homework, or his opinion concerning world topics (personal interview). According to 67% of the participants, they felt like they were treated like all they could talk about was football and football-related things. It made them mad, sad, and wanting to yell that they were more than just football players. Participant 11 reported it as a time when he was in the library with a study group for a very hard class. Every time he interjected, the other students dismissed his thoughts and suggestions, but the minute they were done studying, 2 hours later, they all stayed around and somehow, wanted to hear and talk about football. He talked about how they stayed another hour and half just talking about football and they listened carefully, asking him questions and appearing as if he was teaching a class. It never dawned on him until now, this happened often with this study group, and the whole time, he never told them

that he was more than just a football player (personal interview). He wished he would have told them that yes, he did study for the group discussions and the test. Participant 8 stated:

The idea or fact that a lot of us, as African American male athletes, would talk about this amongst ourselves at practice, dinner, or waiting on film was not a surprise. The surprise happened when it would take place year after year, even in higher education where they thought it would not. (focus group)

***Special treatment for playing football from the community.*** All participants reported special treatment for playing football within the community. Participant 6 reported it was after a big game and the next day he was eating at a restaurant and the manager came to the table, asked him specifically his name. He replied, asking if something was wrong, the manager said no, then asked him if he was a football player. He replied and the manager said, “Eat all you want, the meal is on the house” (personal interview). In response to the same question, Participant 12 reported they all got special treatment from the community for playing football. It was as small as extra t-shirts and as big as monetary assistance for clothing or shoes (focus group).

Special treatment for playing football from the community existed the whole time the athletes played football from their freshmen year until their last game, as voiced by 11 out of the 12 participants. However, Participant 9 shared the good treatment did not hit him until after his last game as a senior. He went to get some clothes and a bite to eat, and at the clothing store and the restaurant, they made him pay full price for all of his items. Both managers looked at him and both of them knew him from previous purchases. The funny thing was, neither one of them said a word but did give him the courtesy of saying to have a good day (focus group). Overall, the participants in this study agreed that in some form, special treatment was given to all athletes, not

just African American males, “but for us [African American male athletes], we assumed it would never end” (Participant 10, personal interview).

### **Presentation of the Data and Results**

Beginning with a collaborative discussion of sports and academic achievement, both the face-to-face interviews and the focus group were designed to answer the research question: How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes? Initial questions from the face-to-face interviews and focus group centered on the topics of a typical day and favorite classes. The next group of questions and responses targeted expectations and achievement, while the last questions and responses delved into experiences as African American male collegiate athletes. In the following sections, I provide the findings of the data analysis based on the interview and focus group responses. The first set of responses came from Participants 1–7 (Interview Questions 1–8). The next set of responses (Focus Group Questions 1–17) came from Participants 8–12 of the focus group.

#### **Interview Responses**

**Interview Question 1: Describe your favorite class studied.** The participants answered this question identifying a variety of classes such as psychology, business communication, calculus, kinesiology, and anatomy. Participant 3 alluded to the fact the he was not fond of any of his classes because it “got in the way of football.” Participant 7 reported, “I was asleep and tired most of the time I went to class, so I really do not recall many classes my freshmen and sophomore years.” Participant 4 stated, “I do not remember the class, I just remember the professor talking and everyone seemed like they too were nodding or sleeping during class.” Participant 1 stated it best: “The classes I learned from really did not teach much, but the interactions with other students became my life-long lesson.”

**Interview Question 2: For you, as an African American male athlete, describe your typical day.** “As an African American male athlete, my typical day was not like any normal student who attended our university” (Participant 3). When responding to this question, participants exhibited similarities and differences. Participants 1, 2, 3, 5, and 7 reported their day started as early as 4:00 a.m. and ended as late 10:00 p.m. Some did early morning workouts and film study if their position coach requested it. They all agreed upon the following as a typical day: workout, breakfast, classes, film study from 1:00–2:30 p.m., practice, and evening tutoring and studying. Participants 4 and 6 described a different typical day. They both reported their day started between 6:00 a.m. and 7:00 a.m. with film. Then, they would go to breakfast, classes, and straight to practice after class because their classes did not end until 2:30 p.m. They worked out after practice and many times missed tutoring just to get back to their rooms before 10:00 p.m. As Participant 5 stated, “There were always many responsibilities as a student athlete, but class was secondary.” Participants 1, 4, 8, and 11 indicated they felt class was secondary because the discussion was “never” about class or grades from coaches, rather, it seemed to always concern around schemes or game plans.

**Interview Question 3: What was your biggest athletic achievement while in college?** The participants gave the following responses to this question. Participant 1 reported starting as a redshirt freshmen, while Participant 2 talked about making all-conference as a junior and senior. Participants 3 and 4 stated, “The ability to start three out of four years in college.” Participant 5 discussed winning a bowl game and how he felt “bigger than life itself” because he thought that would make him play in the National Football League (NFL). Participant 6 paused before answering, then with his voice changing and head nodding up and down, replied, “Making the Deans’ list as a senior.” Participant 6 answered this question with the appearance of pride and



honor, almost as if, he knew he could have had more high academic achievement moments. Participant 7 reported being nominated preseason all-conference. Participants 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, and 12 suggested their athletic achievements created a high impact on their academic achievement because it somehow gave a false pretense that they were closer to becoming professional football players, not just simply graduating from a higher institution.

**Interview Question 4: How have your academics been affected by your participation in sports while attending college?** The participants answered this question with a variety of insightful responses. The responses ranged from: academics was never placed with importance to learning how to balance academics with athletics. Participant 3 stated, “Playing sports in school made me proficient in managing my time.” Participant 6 took a different approach and reported, “I was going pro and I really did not take getting an education seriously, even though I finished with a degree.” According to Participant 7:

It’s a lot of time management and being on the go from one thing to the next, and nobody telling you what needs to be prioritized over a want. The balance of athletics and academics forces you to be efficient with your time.

Participant 1 summed it up by saying, “It was like an afterthought or the thing I needed to do to stay at my school.”

**Interview Question 5: Describe how your commitment to sports affected your academic requirements.** In response to this question, the participants discussed time management, scheduling, and gaining an understanding of wants versus needs. Participant 1 stated, “My commitment to sports affected my academics merely because of time and what I found myself spending the most time on, my sport.” Participant 2 voiced, “It [my commitment] made me understand and gave me a clear picture that college sports took priority over one’s life,

and that academics were important but second to the sport.” Participant 3 stated he found out early what was really important, the sport. “My schedule was made easier for the fall than the spring because it allowed me to concentrate on the sport more than class” (Participant 4). “My commitment to sports did not affect my academic requirements at all because my commitment was to the sport” (Participant 5). “I put all my eggs in one basket, biggest mistake of my life because when playing was over, I felt like I was starting over with life” (Participant 6).

Participant 7 shared:

I wanted to be great at football so that meant I would go over and beyond what was required for my sport. Because of that, I did the least amount of studying I could to make decent grades, therefore, my commitment to academics suffered.

**Interview Question 6: What was your greatest academic achievement while in college?** Asking about the greatest academic achievement while in college brought about varied responses from African American male athletes. One stated his greatest academic achievement happened “right after practice was over and coach called us up and reported to everyone that I had made the dean’s list for the second time” (Participant 1). Participant 2 stated, “Simply graduating from a university.” Participant 7 stated, “Consistently maintaining a 3.0 grade point average his senior year, while grasping the importance of education over sports. “I had many small victories throughout my time at the university but walking across the stage was amazing, so to answer your question, getting my degree and walking across the stage” (Participant 5).

**Interview Question 7: What were your impressions of your status as an African American male on a campus with so few African American males?** Participant 1 reported:

It was very frustrating. I knew the majority of African Americans I came into contact with were in some fashion a student–athlete, not just a student. I felt as if people knew

me from my sport but did not know me as a person. My deepest impression was that I felt like once I was done playing football my position on campus would go from athlete back being just another African American male.

Participant 2 stated that his impression of his status as an African American male on campus with so few was “that no matter that you were an athlete, and thousands of people cheered for you on each and every Saturday, at the end of the day, people still saw you as a threat to their society or world.” Participant 3 reported that he “stood out and that people assumed [he] was only there because [he] was an athlete.” That is why he would tell people who asked that he was at school on a theater scholarship. Participant 4 talked about the gear he wore and how it represented his sport—he wished he did not wear them to class or around campus. Participant 5 shared:

I was one of the few Black faces on campus and I took that opportunity to stand tall and speak my mind regardless of the audience. Some people saw me as a young thug, but they choose their words wisely because they knew I was not a fool. I built great friendships with people who deserved it, especially when it came to my impression of my status as an African American athlete with so few African Americans on campus.

Participant 6 reported that he did not even really pay attention to campus life, he just wanted to play football. Participant 7 stated:

In my heart, I felt I was stereotyped as just another African American athlete who doesn't take academics seriously and who is focused on being a professional football player with no back up plan and now that I really think about it, I behaved just like the stereotype.

**Interview Question 8: Describe any significant experiences related to your unique status as an African American male athlete.** The unique significant experiences that each

participant shared as it related to their status as African American male athletes were described as follows. Participant 1 stated:

The biggest experience I had was in my business class when my professor consistently asked and warranted responses to everyone in class, and not one time did he call on me despite my hand being raised. This is significant because it was over 50 people in this class.

Participant 2 discussed while walking on campus and walking to an intersection with other African American male athletes, how “a White lady in a new vehicle seeing a group of young African American males walking toward her, she quickly locked her doors as if we were going to carjack her.” Participant 3 stated:

I don’t know if it was totally because I was an African American male athlete, but I definitely was treated different in public. I mean once people found out who I was I would get free meals, clothes would be given to me, people wanted autographs, I was invited to different social events.

Participant 4 simply said, “All significant experiences for me happened either on the field or with other athletes on the team. It’s not enough time in the day to hang out with normal students on campus.” Participant 5 discussed how his coach through his acknowledgment of his journey to get himself in the position to play football was his biggest significant experience. Participant 6 shared:

I learned that all Blacks don’t stick together, we don’t support each other towards progressions. Made me a better person. I feel that we have to do more just to be accepted and you still aren’t going to get the credit deserved!

Participant 7 shared:

I have been called n---- several times on an off the football field. I experienced the stereotype of being all about athletics and less on academics. Only lived in the present with no thoughts of life after college or sports. Study hall was perceived as a place of getting answers to tests instead of learning study habits and actual studying. Not having a serious major as it relates to academics.

### **Focus Group Responses**

The responses below are from the second set of questions for the focus group. There was a total of 17 questions.

**Focus Group Question 1: For you, as African American male athletes, describe your typical day.** All participants reported long, tiresome days that were all about football, not school. All participants agreed that as African American male athletes, their typical day was long and on average went from 6:00 a.m. until about 10:00 p.m. Participant 8 stated the only day he looked to was game day. Participant 9 consistently brought up being so tired during the week that all he wanted to do was sleep. Participant 10 reported that his head and body would always hurt at the end of the day, and not one time did he ever recall it hurting from classwork. Participant 11 shared:

Our day started with weightlifting then breakfast to class. After class you had to eat fast then go to film. When film was over, you started practice then when practice was over, you had to get something to eat for dinner then somehow get your time in for study hall.

This is the reason we got home late.

Participant 12 nodded with his head going up and down, then agreed by saying, “now that is exactly how my typical day went.”

**Focus Group Question 2: What were your expectations regarding the balance of your athletic, academic, and social roles prior to college matriculation?** Participants had varying responses to this question. According to Participant 8, his expectations of balancing athletic, academic, and social roles prior to college matriculation were to win at all three: “I was trying to balance all that stuff while I played, attended class, and had a desire for social activities. I now realize that was truly my biggest hurdle—I never learned how to properly balance all three.” Participants 8 and 12 mentioned that if they had to put it in terms of a percentage, it was 70% athletics, 20% academics, and 10% social regarding their expectations of balancing their athletic, academic, and social activism prior to college matriculation. Participant 10 stated it was a combination of trying to win at all three while trying to create an even balance regarding his expectations. According to Participant 9, the balance of athletics, academics, and social roles prior to college matriculation happened when he started to notice how many of the White athletes took education seriously, while “Blacks took it as just something to do, never really comprehending the equilibrium needed to be an all-around productive person.”

**Focus Group Question 3: What were your experiences regarding the balance of your athletic, academic, and social roles after college matriculation?** The participants had candid responses to this question. Participant 8 started the conversation when he reported,

My experiences regarding the balance of athletic, academic, and social roles after college matriculation was simple. I developed a routine. My routine was for the most important things and just doing those other things when I could. So many times, later in my football life, junior and senior year, I found myself studying more (academics) and watching film (football) less.

Participants 10, 11, and 12 agreed it was a matter of prioritizing and understanding what your focus regarding the balance of athletics, academics, and social roles after college matriculation should be. “My focus was all about football until I realized I was not going to play professionally, and, at that time, I thought to myself, maybe I spent too much time on the wrong thing” (Participant 11). Participant 11 continued:

My focus is still on football, even though I am not playing professional football, I am still trying to get on a team and make the squad. I am going to do this for the next 3 years because I know if I can make a team, I will make more doing that than I can if I just simply concentrate on having a good job.

Participant 9 reported:

My experience regarding the balance of all three (athletics, academics, and social) was about looking forward toward the future and realizing my time playing football was almost over. I knew I had to learn how to balance athletic, academic, and social roles just like knowing that one day I would have to balance work, family, and friends.

**Focus Group Question 4: Describe how your commitment to sports impeded your academics as African American male athletes.** This question revealed interesting points.

Participants 8 and 12 reported their commitment to sports never impeded their academics as African American male athletes.

As young as I can remember, I knew I could play football and was going pro, so I became committed to football, so I believe that football never got in the way of my academics, if anything sports helped my academics. Through the participation of sports my understanding of commitment grew. I grew to understand how it is important to finish out things that I start. I became committed to sports and when a teacher once told me “what

happens when you cannot play football anymore”, at that point, I promised myself to at least maintain eligibility in school, but never did I commit to academics the same as I did sports. Sports has never impeded my academics. (Participant 12)

Participant 9 described his commitment to sports and its impediment to his academics, stating:

My commitment to my sport did impede my academics because my professors’ office hours were always during my practice, and if I was late to practice there was a consequence because no coach wanted to hear about needing to talk to a professor during practice time.

Participant 10 stated:

As an African American male athlete, I can honestly say that my commitment to my sport was about money not academics. Athletes make more money than the average profession, so I was committed to trying to make money. If academics would have proven to pay more somehow or someday, knowing me, I would have been committed to it then.

According to Participant 11:

My commitment to my sport impeded my academics because I spent more time on the sport than academics. On an average I spent 8 to 9 hours a day on my sport and barely 1 to 2 hours on academic work.

**Focus Group Question 5: As African American male athletes, describe how educational professionals (teachers, coaches, principals, professors) played a role in your academic pursuits.** The participants of this study described how educational professionals played a role in their educational pursuit as none, very little, and what their plan was when football was done. Participants 8, 10, 11, and 12 agreed that no one teacher, coach, or professor played a role in their academic pursuits. According to Participant 10:



They [coaches and teachers] discussed things such as make sure you pass, not pulling me to the side, and talking to me about if the class is hard or if I need tutoring, almost as if my teacher was saying, all you have to do is pass, not learn the content.

Participant 11 brought up an interesting memory when stated all he could recall was his teachers and coaches saying to him “do any and all extra credit.” At that time, Participant 8 injected every time he saw a coach all they would say to him is “we need you during the season.” Participant 9 added:

My teachers and coaches, but none of my professors, really emphasized education. They stressed to me that one day my athletic career would be done, and I must have something to fall back on, otherwise I would be just another athlete who went to college and got nothing out of the college, but the college got the most out of me.

**Focus Group Question 6: Did you perceive fellow teammates being gently or forcefully pushed into specific academic majors/courses/friendly professors, et cetera?**

When approached to answer this question, the participants unanimously stated they did not feel gently or forcefully pushed into any specific academic majors/courses, and they did not perceive professors or fellow teammates doing so. Participant 9 relayed, “Your schedule was handed to you every semester. I just thought this was the track to graduate. Never did I think that the coaches or university placed me into these courses just to keep me eligible.” Participant 11 stated:

I can honestly say now that I think about it, I do not know. I did not have anyone in my family who ever attended college or a university. I just trusted my university to do what was right for me because they recruited me to play for their university.

**Focus Group Question 7: How did playing your sport affect your ability to engage in academic, social, or career development activities during college?** The participants had a range of responses to this question. Participants 9, 11, and 12 stated they had no time to engage in academic, social, or career development activities during college. Participant 9 emphasized playing football was fun and gave great moments; however, “It did not prepare me for life after football and having a mandate to attend a career development training would have been very beneficial. After all, we did have mandated film study.” Participant 11 insisted that even in “The off-season the sport came first and everything else was secondary.” According to Participant 8, playing football affected his ability to engage in academic, social, and career development activities during college because he “was unable to do what the average student does in college, get to network or do internships to develop skills for a career.” Participant 10 reported that he was never encouraged to engage in any academic, social, or career development sessions or trainings—“the only thing anybody ever emphasized was football.”

**Focus Group Question 8: When did academics become significant in your life?** This question also yielded a variety of responses. Participant 8 stated, “academics have never become significant in my life,” while Participant 9 reported academics has evolved into “being important and that happened the minute I realized I was not going to become a professional football player. I needed to figure out how to make a decent living with my college degree.” According to Participant 10, academics became significant his junior year in high school when he realized he was “good enough to get a football scholarship, but not good enough to play professionally.” Participants 11 and 12 both stated academics became significant the end of their sophomore year in college when they both started “getting tired of football” and wanting to do something “less stressful” and still make good money. Participant 12 stated:

The moment academics became really significant to me was about a year ago when my girlfriend at the time, now my wife, said to me, “Can we just talk about other stuff other than football?” And I looked at her and, honestly, at the time could not think of anything else to talk about. But the truth was I was not comfortable talking about nothing but football—at that moment academics became real to me.

**Focus Group Question 9: If you had to choose, which would have more emphasis in your life—academics or sports? Explain.** Here, the participants discussed a common theme: football. “If I had to choose, I would admit that football had more emphasis in my life than academics because football was my outlet to help me with my anger” (Participant 8). “The choice is clear. Football had more emphasis than academics in my life because it has taught me more lessons, for example, fall down get up, give it your all even when you have no more to give” (Participant 11). According to Participant 12, “If having to choose, I would choose football as having more emphasis in my life because that is where I spent most of my time and gained my motivation to either accept the outcome or change it.” Participant 9 stated:

This is a trick question. Football taught me lessons, but academics allowed me to grasp the understanding to not repeat the lesson learned, so I would say that academics has had more emphasis in my life, but it could be easily looked at as football.

According to Participant 10, “It is easy to say that football has had more emphasis in my life, but the truth is academics has sustained me in my life. Therefore, I must admit academics has had more of an emphasis in my life.”

**Focus Group Question 10: During the recruiting process, which was more imperative when selecting a school—academics or athletics?** During the recruiting process, all five participants agreed that athletics was imperative when they were selecting the university

or college to attend (Participant 8, 9, 10, 11, & 12). Participants 9 and 12 stated, “Now that I think about it, I do not recall even asking about academics or anything dealing with such.” According to Participant 12, “I asked more questions about working-out facilities, dorms, and places we get to eat at on campus and not one question about classes, tutoring, or academics.” Participant 8 reported, “Man, I really wished someone would have talked to me about how important it is to attend a university with high academic standards. But the truth is, I probably would not have listened.” The truth to this question is, “I wished I would have had a parent or someone next to me to assist me in making such a big decision because I was only thinking about football and the school with the best facilities” (Participant 10).

**Focus Group Question 11: How prepared were you, academically, to enter into your university?** This question brought an array of responses. Participant 8 responded, “Not at all—I could always get away with just doing the minimum; now it is different. I have become academically prepared over time.” Participant 9 stated, “My preparation for college started in high school because I knew I would need to understand and know at least the basics of reading, writing, and studying.” According to Participant 10, “I was prepared enough to get by, but not enough to really excel academically. But as the person said earlier, with tutoring and learning better studying habits, I am now better prepared to succeed academically.” Participant 11 said he was prepared “just enough also to maintain eligibility, not achieve academic honors or academic scholarships. After all, I came to play football.” “I was not prepared enough to reach my full potential academically. My academic challenge was my fault because of time management, not academic intelligence” (Participant 12).

**Focus Group Question 12: As African American males on a campus with so few African American males, describe significant experiences in class.** The description of

significant experiences in class consisted of the Black experience and lack of intelligence. “The most significant experience I had in class was the fact that nearly all my professors would ask my opinion when we discussed African American issues” (Participant 8). Participant 10 reported that many significant experiences happened outside of class: “I really never paid that much attention to such a small concern, I passed, and I moved on.” According to Participant 12, “My most significant experience happened in many of my classes when my professors would assume I was an athlete and they would dismiss any comment I made toward the topic or subject we were discussing.” As reported by Participant 9:

African American males on campus—both traditional students and athletes—probably shared the same significant experience. We both knew there were not that many of us on campus. We both knew that stereotypes were hanging over our heads, and we both knew we somehow had to be better than the other students, or at least accomplish a decent grade. With that being said, my significant experience happened the moment I entered any of my classes and the moment I left.

The African American male experience on a campus with so few African American males, as reported by Participant 11, happened when:

I got the highest score on a test and the professor asked me what was the name of my tutor because he/she is really good and many of the other athletes should ask for her/him when taking this class. Granted I did have a tutor, but I did have to study and know the material going into the test.

**Focus Group Question 13: Describe how your academic requirements affected your sport commitment.** Here, the participants stated their sport commitment was barely affected or not affected at all. Participants 11 and 12 described how academic requirements affected their

sport commitment as barely; however, Participant 12 reported that he chose the word “barely” because:

It was the one time of the day where you did not have to repeat a period, like we did so many times in practice or in film when the coach kept playing back the tape to make a point. So academic requirements barely affected my sport commitment.

Participant 8 stated:

The academic requirements of the university I attended never affected my sport commitment. Not one time did I ever think about becoming ineligible? The coaches made sure I attended tutoring and classes were set up with easiest classes during the season and the hardest classes were in the spring.

Participant 9 reported, “With the tutoring and mandated academic hours given to us, it was really hard to ever feel as if my academics interfered with my sport commitment.” Participant 10 described how his academic requirements affected his sport commitment as:

None at all. If anything, it slowly became my way to get away from the football life and just be a student even if it was just for a class, test, or tutoring, so now I would describe it as my peace that assisted me in my football experience.

**Focus Group Question 14: Describe how sports participation affected your studies while being a college student.** The participants paused, pondering, and then provided frank responses. “The only time sport participation affected my studies was the day after a game because I would not study or prepare for a test simply due to hurting or being in pain from the game” (Participant 8). Participant 9 stated, “Sports participation affected my studies because I felt myself preparing more for games and/or practice more than I prepared for a test, quiz, or

anything dealing with my academics.” Participant 10 reported that sports participation affected his studies while being a college student in the realization that

Sports participation did get in the way of studying. I spent more time and energy on football-related things and stuff, which amounted to less time on academics, writing papers, tutoring, or simply setting up times to visit with a professor to get a better understanding of an assignment.

According to Participant 11, sports participation affected his studies as a college student as “a concern for time-management, major interference, constant road block, and as I got closer to graduating, a nuisance to my academics.” Participant 12 described the effects of sports participation while being a college student as “being so tired after practice and during the week it helped me to study better and stay focused because of the short amount of time to get everything done.”

**Focus Group Question 15: While being a college student, describe the expectations of your peers about being a student–athlete.** The participants described the expectations of their peers as being—everything was handled, they were just jocks on campus. Participant 8 stated, “My peers told me often that being an athlete is easy because you guys get everything handed to you and all you do is play football and have fun all day.” Participant 9 responded by saying, “I really never talked to my peers about expectations of being a student–athlete.”

Participant 10 stated:

If you are talking about my peers are far as students just attending the university, we never had those discussions, but my peers who were fellow athletes, we were and always considered ourselves football players first and everything else next.

For some, expectations from peers was a combination of what others had said (Participants 8 and 10).

The difference was we only talked about school or academics if we had the same class together. But as far as expectations from peers, I believe they never had expectations of us—they simply wanted us to win so they could brag. (Participant 11)

“The only time I ever heard from a peer about any expectation was when a classmate stated, “all football players stick together, no matter what” (Participant 12).

**Focus Group Question 16: What was or is the most disturbing problem you faced as African American male athletes pertaining to coaches’ or professors’ attitudes about academics?** Participant 8 stated, “The most disturbing problem I faced pertaining to an attitude about academics was my coaches acting like academics did not exist.” According to Participant 9, “For me it was my professors acting like sports were not important and I needed to wake up and take my academics serious because one day sports would be done and now what are you going to do.” Participant 10 responded:

Coaches said academics were really important, but the unwritten rule was sports always took precedence and if you missed practice, workout, or film the consequence consisted of a punishment to remind you of the real reason why you are here—football.

Participant 11 stated, “It was never my professors; simply my coach’s attitude about academics and how it was just a thing to do to stay eligible.” Participant 12 reported that his problem:

Did not happen with coaches or professors; mine was simply from the institution itself.

To see and hear that athletes during the first 2 years really do not have a choice in what they want to do, classes they take, tutoring being forced upon you, and no walkthrough about college life. You know, like having a walkthrough of your day as a college student,



no longer a high school student, but a simulation of how your day would look, adjusting to your class schedule, and what all goes into playing at a Division I university.

**Focus Group Question 17: Describe any significant experiences related to your unique status as African American male athletes.** The description of significant experiences related to the unique status of being African American male athletes brought about stern and reflective responses. According to Participant 8, “I was at a local restaurant and a person found out who I was and paid for my meal—good thing we won that game.” According to Participant 9, “During the summers I was given small jobs making good money to do nothing but sit and watch trucks come in and leave out. I truly believe this was done only because I played for the university”. Participant 10 shared:

I was accused of being involved in a fight on campus because it involved African American males and somehow my face was recognized as being there. Good thing I could not be at two places at one time. This was due to the fact our game place was in another state and we did not get back until the day after the game.

Participant 11 stated:

My unique experience related to being an African American male athlete took place the night I was pulled over and the police was searching my car and the moment they found out I played football for the university, they stopped and sent me on my way with the following words: “be safe and go straight to your apartment to get ready for the big game.”

Participant 12 followed:

My unique experience was similar to his as it relates to a significant experience as an African American male athlete on campus, except the campus police officer told me he

thought he recognized my face and that he did not have to search me and he trusted what I was telling him because I told him I play football for the university.

### **Summary**

In Chapter 4, I presented an overview of this explanatory case study. In this study I sought to describe the unique experiences of the effects of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement, as this specific topic had not yet been examined in the literature. The focus of the research question on how sports participation affected the pursuit of academic achievement by African American male collegiate athletes yielded a variety of responses. The sample included seven face-to-face interviewees and one focus group of five participants. The data for this explanatory case study included anecdotal notes, video recordings, and semistructured interview questions. I described the study sample demographics and efforts to ensure trustworthiness of the data in this chapter. The data analysis process utilized open, axial, and selective coding to identify common themes along with supporting details regarding lived experiences of African American male athletes as it pertained to academic pursuits (or lack thereof). Notably, I presented summaries of the semistructured interview and focus group questions and categorized the data in alignment with the study's central research question. Participants described the impact of sports participation on their academic achievement through a multitude of reactions and responses. Overall, the uncovered themes included: (a) Athletes shared typical days that were different from other students; (b) Athletes had long days; (c) Academics became an afterthought; (d) Sports never impeded academics; (e) Time management was essential; (f) People assumed African American athletes only knew football; (g) and The athletes received special treatment.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

According to the NCAA (2016), the emergence of African American male athletes attending universities and colleges to play football has risen in the last 20 years. However, graduating within the first 5 years of start date and high academic achievement of merit reveals a decline for African American male athletes attending colleges and universities while playing Division I football (S. Davis, 2016; Glass, 2015; Harrison et al., 2015; Rushin, 2016). I provided a qualitative understanding of how sports participation may impact African American male athletes' academic achievement. The purpose of this explanatory case study was to explore how sports participation impacts African American male collegiate athletes while pursuing their college degree. In this chapter, I will summarize and interpret the findings of this study and discuss the findings in relation to the literature. I then will explore limitations and theoretical and transformative implications pertaining to future practice, as well as suggest an expansion of this study in future research.

### **Summary of the Results**

Seven individual, semistructured, face-to-face interviews along with a focus group of five participants were conducted to collect qualitative data. Interview questions aligned with the study's central question and conceptual framework derived from current referenced literature. To conduct qualitative research concerning sports participation and its impact on academic achievement for African American male athletes, I collected, analyzed, and connected the participants' perceptions of how sports participation impacted their academic achievement.

Crucial findings included that their typical day was not like other students. Participants discussed the length of their day along with the pressure of practice and class, hence, their average day was filled with different requirements. Next, the participants discussed and

described consequences for missing practice or film—viewing football films as part of training. Participants discussed stories of how the consequence for missing practice or film was always on their mind; running after practice, early morning consequence before breakfast, or any extra workout/punishment that the coach deemed fitting. Finally, participants expressed how academics became undervalued. Participants described how coaches rarely brought up academia, and as one participant reported, academics were so undervalued that he could not recall any coach ever praising an athlete for making good grades or passing a test; however, constant praise was given for a game victory.

Participants' perceptions varied on the impediment of sports on academics and how their academics affected their sports commitment. All participants recognized continued support for African American male athletes attending universities and colleges while playing football. The following sections offer a summation and interpretation of results regarding this explanatory case study. These include perceptions (a) regarding long days, (b) regarding frustrations, (c) regarding time management, and (d) regarding money over academics.

### **Perceptions of African American Male Athletes Regarding Long Days**

The participants had varying perceptions about the longevity of days with classes compared to days without classes. The days without classes were discussed in reference to the Friday before the game on Saturday and how they had to get their bags packed and be in a specific place by a specific time. This, as the participants explained, may not have seemed like a part of a long day, but as the years went by, the participants discussed how this simple Friday many times extended their day, while creating stress relating to a class test, assignment, or making sure the bag had all needed equipment. Overall, the years of experience or age of the participants did not reveal conclusive differences among the participants. Of the 12 participants,

11 agreed that the average day of an African American male athlete consisted of a minimum of 10 hours and a maximum of 14 hours. The long days created a sense of what was important, and what, as an African American male athlete, should be the focus of their day because the average day was going to be long.

Equal viewpoints were provided regarding the challenges and barriers of long days and all the nuances that were incorporated into the day of an African American male athlete. Although time constraints were perceived as barriers in long days, two participants acknowledged that long days assisted in keeping them out of trouble and allowed them to maintain their focus.

Participants shared ideas about how to address the long days and the needed adjustments for the next generation of African American male athletes.

According to S. Davis (2016), Harper et al. (2013), and Harrison et al. (2015), a huge concern for African American male athletes is the long days that are required when attending a college or university to play football or any sport. This new commitment may create a sense of being overwhelmed. However, Cooper (2014) discussed long days as not a hindrance for African American male athletes, but a psychological factor that African American male athletes have when they enter higher education, which influences their mental approach behind attending the university or college of their choice.

Harrison et al. (2015) reported that long days for many African American athletes are tough; however, when a player has an injury or needs to get treatment (i.e., when a minor injury requires the athlete to seek medical therapies before the injury gets worse or to get better faster), it can make the day become overwhelming with class, eating, and workouts. The day becomes so long that African American male athletes then revert themselves to a simple day of treatments and sleep, placing academics on the back burner or neglecting them entirely. Participant 9

discussed how his day was so long that it was a test on what was going to be his primary focus—football or class. A real decision of, “Is this worth it or am I truly committed to this” (Participant 9, focus group). No matter how long his day was, he talked about pulling himself together because he knew he had to get through the long day.

### **Perceptions Regarding Frustration**

Participants discussed how frustrations came not just from campus life or classes, but from themselves, coaches, and stereotypical behaviors. When discussing frustrations concerning self, Participant 6 voiced how he felt that he had let himself down because with all the preparation he did to get into the college or university to play football, he simply never once considered all the work that he had to do to maintain his eligibility while attending the place of higher education. Participants 2 and 11 stated their frustrations with themselves took place with the high demand of athletic requirements and the low standards for self-improvement. Participant 11 really talked with strong conviction about not one time could he recall taking time out to learn about each other or simply the personal reason for why that person is playing football. He talked about how he felt frustrations due to the fact that all his coaches knew he came to play football, but no one ever asked him about the money he was sending money home to help his mom. According to Participant 6, “My frustration came from coaches.” They talked to us about taking class very serious (*sic*) but when it came to needing extra tutoring the opportunity was never afforded. Participant 10 reported that his biggest frustration took place when it was rumored that the head coach was leaving and he did not have to give the team a clue as to if he was going or staying, but if the participant wanted to transfer, he had to get it cleared by the coach.

The stereotypical behavior that frustrated African American male athletes in this study consisted of nonverbal communication. This was reported from several participants. Participant 2

reported he was frustrated with stereotypical behavior from a person when he was at the library trying to describe a book he needed, and the librarian would not let him talk, taking 45 minutes to get the book. Further frustrations reported about stereotypical behavior came from African American male athletes pertaining to the ground crew workers. Participant 8 discussed how he would always talk to the grounds crew workers on campus about how the game went and what the team could do to get into the basketball tournament. “The problem with this was I played football” (Participant 8, focus group). Participant 5’s greatest frustration dealing with stereotypical behavior took place when he was walking on campus late and campus police pulled up and ask for identification. While getting his identification, the officers asked him what his reason was for being on campus. He talked about refusing to give his ID, reasoning if he could get into the dorm then he was a student attending this university.

### **Perceptions Regarding Time Management**

All 12 participants in this explanatory case study mentioned or alluded to having issues with time management as African American male athletes playing at a major Division I university. Participants 2, 3, and 6 reported time management was the most difficult thing they had to learn in their first year—“having to put everything in its proper place, while making sure you are where you need to be, and understanding that each section needs managing and the whole time, you have to be aware of time” (Participant 3, personal interview). According to Participant 1 because of a lack of proper time management skills, he believed it really messed with his ability to properly assert himself to football. Participant 4 stated, while juggling so many things from football to class assignments, an athlete must have a critical plan that consists of a goal with uncompromising results to achieve whatever the ultimate goal is. When discussing the topic of time management, Participant 4 voiced a concern that if African American male athletes

could figure out what could wait, what needed prioritization, and what needed immediate attention, he could figure out time management.

Continued perceptions regarding time management from African American male athletes revealed a conscious concern of this issue. Participant 8 reported that time management for student-athletes required an understanding of how to manage football time and expectations with the standards of college eligibility. Participants 9 and 10 discussed how student-athletes, even with structured times of class and practice, must have a motivation to get things done. According to Participant 10 the time management needed to be successful while attending a major Division I university and playing football is “humongous, leaving no room for other life responsibilities nor does it care. The bottom line is, you have to manage your football life as best as you can, because after that, you have very little time for anything else.” Participant 12 summarized it this way: student-athletes, especially African American male athletes, need to understand that time management is the ability to place accountability on oneself while dividing time into certain activities to meet the goal of that activity. “It is the hardest thing you will learn, and yet the thing that requires you to adjust the fastest” (Participant 12, focus group).

Cooper (2014) and Rushin (2016) identified time management for African American male athletes as the most important element of training, and yet, no formal instruction for managing time is provided. Time management for African American male athletes is a conscious decision that each athlete must make to determine his maximum productivity to achieve his short- and long-term goals he has set for himself (S. Davis, 2016). Participants 3 and 10 discussed time management as a “brush over” or “We know you already know this” type of conversation during freshmen orientation, when it really should have been a topic all its own, with students broken into smaller groups to emphasize the importance of it. Harrison et al.



(2015) discussed time management as the one crucial component that gives an indication if an athlete will be successful or fail during his 4- to 5-year participation in college sports. However, Gaston-Gayles (2014) and Locke (2011) posited that time management is not the problem; it is a matter of focus—the average African American male athlete is not focused on academics, but is focused simply on his sport.

Cooper (2014) and S. Davis (2016) mentioned time management as an instrument that requires a skill through mastery of balance, so it does not control the athlete, but the athlete controls it. This skill involves managing time effectively and efficiently to create habits for personal and professional productivity. All African American male athletes must understand that no matter how one looks at it or tries to address it, nothing can be done once a person is out of time (Glass, 2015). For African American male athletes playing at any major Division I university, time management is about accomplishing whatever goal the person has in the amount of time he has. If the focus is getting good grades, then tutoring or any class endeavor get it done. Time management is essential to enhancing the life of any athlete (Glass, 2015). According to Participant 5, time management is the one true mirror check for an African American male athlete. Time management “creates an understanding that time management is all about you” (Participant 5, personal interview). If an athlete has a problem with time management, then it is him, not time management that has the problem. The athlete is the one who allows his time to be wasted. African American male athletes have to consider the things he is allowing to rob his time, after all the word itself tells and says everything—time management.

Cooper (2014) suggested that time management is a misconception that many athletes struggle with and it is just a personal choice of what is important. Participants 3, 6, 8, and 12 reported that time management is a unique concept. “There is so much of it, and yet limits, in

each situation a person has” (Participant 3). “There is only so much of it and no matter what a person does they cannot get any more of it. It is funny because it cannot be sped up or slowed down” (Participant 6, personal interview). “Since that is said, we cannot manage time, but we can learn to manage ourselves as it relates to time at the moment” (Participant 8, focus group). “We have to understand that we cannot control time, but we can control how we use it” (Participant 12, focus group).

### **Perceptions Regarding Academics Undervalued**

Many participants offered an array of statements regarding their perceptions of money over academics. Participant 5 stated that money over academics is on the mind of all athletes, not just African American males. Athletes hear more about athletes and money than academics and accomplishments. According to Participant 9, the bottom line is, African American male athletes know that if they succeed as a professional athlete, no other job in the world would pay as much as the National Football League, as a 22-year-old. According to Participants 2, 4, 5, and 10, perception is reality and the reality is money is always talked about more than academics. “The average athlete comes into a major college or university wanting to make it big, not from academics but from being a professional athlete and making as much money as he can in a short amount of time” (Participant 5, personal interview).

Participant 3 felt compelled to share that the whole idea that money takes precedence over academics is false. The truth is that young men have heard people talk about money and needing money, or how, if they had money, so many of their problems would go away. It was not money over academics, but rather a quick survival means. “We should have heard more about how with more education I stand a better chance to help my situation or problem. Now, we

should realize that it was never money over academics, but simply what we heard the most” (Participant 3, personal interview).

Maybe, if African American male athletes heard more lessons about getting more education or taking education more seriously, they could have achieved more in the academic arena. The next generation that comes through this college or the next university will have the same aspirations as others obtaining high academic achievements. They will come in with the moderate hopes of making it to the pros while putting their academics first and their football last. This happens, not because they wanted to put money over academics, but because sports become the quickest way to achieve wealth while utilizing the one thing that most of them are comfortable using—their body that has been conditioned through football.

The idea that all African American male athletes desire to make it to the pros is not true, nor has such a statement been indicated in the literature. A high percentage of African American male athletes come from a low socioeconomic background and many would love to get their mothers out of poverty (Participant 1). However, society and the media play a huge role in the misconception of money over academics through an imbalance that is institutionally constructed and consistently perpetuated (Participants 7, 8, & 12). According to Participant 8, “It’s funny when you think about it, money over academics—it became obviously clear when my time was done playing for the university. I came in broke and I left broke.” “The university had money before we got here and the university will have money when we leave, so now we should realize that it was not just us thinking about money over academics, it was the university too” (Participant 11, focus group).

The concern of money over academics in the athletic world has been in discussion for decades. Division I colleges and universities are spending three to six times more on athletics per

athlete than on academics per athlete (Glass, 2015). African American male athletes across the spectrum have an idea about how much the average professional football player makes compared to a teacher, store manager, or any basic job that requires higher or formal education (Rushin, 2016). Participant 5 voiced money over academics as trying to get drafted during the top three rounds is crucial, that is life-changing money, and if that happens, it makes all the training and practices worth it. This point alone makes money over academics such a dilemma.

The average NFL player who is drafted in the first three rounds will have a signing bonus between \$8 million and \$400,000 compared to the person in the last round, whose signing bonus is \$60,000 on average (Harrison et al., 2015). Those NFL salaries seem to look really good for African American male athletes. The problem with those numbers are the chances of succeeding as a professional athlete is less than 3%, and yet many of the athletes are not paying attention to that percentage nor having deep conversations about what happens when football is done and real work starts (Participant 3). The concept of money over academics is not a new one; the average African American male athlete comes into a college or university to obtain a new socioeconomic status. Sports rather than education is seen as that vehicle of financial security (Rushin, 2016).

The NCAA (2016) has initiatives to institute academic reforms that hold student-athletes accountable to progress toward obtaining a college degree. However, this accountability is a one-size-fits-all approach and does not consider the learning styles or different academic levels that each African American male athlete may enter in a college or university (New, 2016; Palmer et al., 2014). Colleges and universities are trying their best to accommodate the specific needs for each athletic program and their athletes. These accommodations include counseling, treatment for eating disorders, and career awareness programs (NCAA, 2016). The problem is this gesture

does not include past athletes coming and speaking to the new athletes or incoming freshmen about what happens if you do not make it to the professional level (S. Davis, 2016).

The mentality of money over academics is not a new phenomenon. This mentality has crept into the mindset of many African American male athletes from lucrative deals that other African American male athletes are making (Harrison et al., 2015). The problem is that instead of thinking about the low chances of getting such a deal, the average African American male athlete is thinking, I am next, or If they can, then I can (New, 2016). According to Participants 1, 4, 6, 8, and 11, discussions in the locker room were rarely about academics, but instead how to get better at football and what is needed to get to the league. Participant 6 summarized:

The whole focus point of money over academics is not by accident. This thinking starts when we African American male athletes are young and begin to take shape in junior high or middle school. If people want us to think more about academics or school, then show us more financial gain through education or academic achievement then we can make a choice to make better academic decisions (personal interview).

### **Discussion of the Results**

The purpose of this section is to discuss the results of responses of long days, time management, frustration, and money over academics that overwhelmingly emerged as the themes from participants in the face-to-face interviews and focus group. The responses allowed me to comprehend that African American male athletes saw the participation of collegiate sports as a step in the direction of reaching the goal of becoming a professional athlete, not the long days, time management, frustration, and the thinking of money over academics as pillars or obstacles needed for such a goal. Results from this study indicate the African American male athletes were able to voice their emotional feelings experienced while participating in a

collegiate sport. While African American male athletes have been previously studied concerning upward mobility through sports and psychosocial factors in higher education, the participants in this study put words to feelings and offer a direct relation to the question based on lived experiences. These feelings were expressed by multiple participants with words such as resentful, confused, stunned, insulted, and disturbed. Participant 8 stated this study allowed him to finally put words to how he feels as an African American male collegiate athlete, and those words were “disappointed, embarrassed, and worried” for all African American male athletes who play sports for any college or university. This sentiment was observed not only in the face-to-face interviews but in the focus group as well.

My notes from observing the participants during the study add insight into the reflective process. The observations revealed the participants were developing a variety of cognitive reflections and personal responses and pausing before an answer to give life to the response to the semistructured questions. The participants revealed cognitive reflections such as prolonged pausing prior to responding to the question asked and also multiple participants correcting themselves during the interview and focus group. For example, Participant 1 and Participant 9, paused on an average of 5–8 seconds on some of their responses, only to pause again, and emphasize a different response to the semistructured question.

African American male athletes’ lived experiences, cognitive personal reflections, and emotional attachments have not been previously voiced in literature. African American male athletes in this study, specifically through face-to-face interviews and a focus group, created internal and external connections because of their participation in a collegiate sport while obtaining an academic achievement. The lived experiences manifested by African American male athletes within this study allow researchers to consider in detail the athletes’ structural function,

the different identity stages of African American male athletes, self-determination, and emotional viewpoints afforded by a study looking at the impact of sports participation on academic achievement by African American male athletes.

## **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

### **Conceptual Framework**

**Parsons's SFT.** Parsons (1970) explained how structural functionalism allows for a culture or group to have a sense of belonging through an ability to adapt or change. All participants described how playing football at a major Division I university put them into a position to bring about change for them in society through higher education or becoming a professional football player. Parsons explained through his social action theory that people interact with others to create meaningful relationships that stem from a cause and effect from past and present socializations.

For example, all participants described meaningful moments created from relationships with coaches and professors and how those impacted their academic achievement. Participants expressed how many of the coaches would not discuss or even ask about class or how they were doing academically, which left a profound negative impact on their academic achievement. Participant 3 stated, "Coaches and professors had a unique opportunity to reinforce the importance of education and academic achievement, instead they just went along with the idea, athletes who just so happened to be students." Parsons also explained a theory based on socioeconomic status, noting that society looks up to high positions based on money and status. Overwhelmingly, all participants described and shared how succeeding as a professional athlete would have brought them financial security and a higher status in society; not just in their

neighborhoods, but in the broader world. All participants described how as early as they could remember, parents told them how well they played football and they would be a football star.

**Cross's nigrescence model of African American identity.** A second theory framing this study was Cross's (1971) nigrescence model of African American identity. This theory was based on developing an identity through five stages in becoming African American. The stages are: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment. All five of stages potentially lead to a healthy identity for an African American. During the pre-encounter, Cross (1971) discussed how the first encounters of African American males shape early development. Participant 7 reported when he was young he still remembers his mother talking about how much money he was going to make as a national football player, which would help the family from being poor.

Next is the encounter stage, which Cross explained is a process that happens when African American males try to figure out those events (negative or positive) that brought about a desire to change. Each participant discussed in their own way details of poverty, hunger, lacking financial stability, and watching their family work so hard to have so little, therefore, causing the majority of the African American male athletes to create a desire for change through the message of football and financial security. Each participant experiences encounters of events such as watching other African American male athletes go from rags to riches through sports or the encounter of seeing someone who resembles them and their story with attainable results.

Immersion/emersion is the third stage, and the first time, as Cross explained, that an inner struggle begins to happen. Immersion is when events and politics begin to come to the forefront pertaining to African American causes, while emersion happens when individuals gain insight to take control of emotions and intellectual experience for change. All participants described



important immersion/emersion events and problems on campus and in society and wanting to have solutions. For example, each participant described events such as isolation, problems in class of value of opinion on subject of discussion, and the university noninvolvement of African American issues.

The fourth stage, internalization, is when challenges and problems come about because of the transformation that the African American male is trying to create. African American male athletes during this stage develop a sense of positive pride of their African American identity and internalize a personal grasp of who they are and the limitations that society has placed on them. All participants described with candor and frankness their comprehension of the importance of obtaining their degree after receiving it, not fully recognizing the importance before. The participants also voiced a strong concern that they almost fell into the trap of just going to a college or university and not getting their degree.

The final stage of African American identity that Cross discussed was internalization-commitment. In this stage, the African American male athlete decides to become active in his community through standing up for injustice and trying to eliminate oppression. Overall, the participants in this study described and discussed a desire to bring about change, but not understanding what avenue to use or how to go about it to address many of the concerns they have as African American males and former athletes. An implication for future practice would consist of holding regular or mandatory panel discussions with current and former African American male athletes who obtained their college degree, along with community activists, and former African American male athletes who did not obtain their college degree.

Cross's (1971) theory of nigrescence model of African American identity revealed some interesting points of discussion. All participants in this study demonstrated or described all five

stages of this model. The stages of pre-encounters, encounters, immersion/emersion, internalization, and internalization-commitment all emerged in comments by each participant, manifesting based on the growth of the prior stage. Through the lived experiences of African American male athletes, Cross's (1971) nigrescence model of African American identity is accurate and being experienced through the lens of uninformed African American male athletes.

**Deci and Ryan's SDT.** Deci and Ryan (1990) explained an entity, SDT, can construct an individual's behavior to drive cognitive movement. SDT is driven by the three components of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In the competence stage, the individual demonstrates an effectiveness in the environment he is reared in and tries his best to control outcomes as they are presented. In the autonomous stage, the individual is working on controlling the path of his life, while relatedness for the individual is gaining and obtaining meaningful relationships as a sense of belonging. Unanimously, all the participants described a determination to get out of financial strain in their homes or the ideology that sports is their only way to make a future of stability for themselves. An implication for future practice would be to have one-on-one discussions with all African American male athletes to understand their personal sense of self-determination as they enter a college or university to play football.

The accuracy of Deci and Ryan's (1990) SDT could be debated in terms of what is effectiveness in an environment. African American male athletes probably try to control outcomes to the best of their ability based on knowledge, skill, and parental involvement or noninvolvement. Deci and Ryan did not provide a specific age of maturity for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. However, each participant in this study did exemplify autonomy and relatedness. Overwhelmingly, participant after participant voiced his aspiration to control his life through some form of self-determination. As Participant 10 stated, "I realized in high school, I

did not want to live paycheck-to-paycheck, so I had to control the choices I made to have a better life” (focus group). In making those choices, all the participants described the importance of meaningful relationships. Relatedness for all the participants was very important and assisted in their path in positive ways. “The meaningful relationships I developed with the guys on the team was crucial, I can say that because all of us graduated on time and are still great friends to this day” (Participant 3, personal interview). Self-determination is a theory, and at the same time a concept that all African American male athletes participating in this study revealed as important and how it brought about a personal grind to overcome and achieve most all things that they wanted.

## **Research Literature**

The results of this study align with much of the existing body of literature. For example, the NCAA (2016) stated 77% of African American male athletes are graduating from colleges and universities within 6 years. Harrison et al. (2015) noted the NCAA’s graduation rate is skewed for African American male athletes and may not be candid. In this study Participants 1, 5, 7, 8, and 11 responded that graduation appears to take longer for African American male athletes than for white athletes or even students in general.

Furthermore, Harrison et al. (2015) reported African American male athletes still have trouble with demanding coaches and schedules, as well as balancing athletic obligations with academic requirements. In line with balancing athletics and academics, overwhelmingly, all the participants agreed with Locke’s (2014) point that striving for academic success while participating in a sport can create a role confusion, thus, a commitment to the sport over the commitment to academics. According to Glass (2015) the demands for practice, study time, and

socializing may create an improper balance of what is important, which was substantiated by many of the participants in their discussion of learning time management.

While agreeing with struggles balancing time, many of the participants disagreed with Harrison et al.'s (2015) claim that African American male athletes are motivated by extrinsic rewards. Participant 10 stated in the focus group, "It is our personal drive, our very own motivation from within that makes us, play and play hard to be the very best." However, Gill (2014) posited that the perks of sports, like extrinsic rewards, may outweigh the recognition of academics. In this study, Participants 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, and 12 agreed that the following perks were positive influences: eating out, buying clothes, and mandated tutoring.

Finally, NAEP (2016) claimed African American male athletes may understand how to get out of poverty and still look down upon education. Glass (2015) reported that critics imply academic failure is because playing sports has decreased the amount of study time. In contrast, the participants in this study discussed how playing a sport assisted in their academic success. Participant 1 stated:

If I was not playing football, I know for a fact that my academics would not have had any concern, therefore, not allowing myself to be in the position to attend any college or university, but because of sports, my concern for academics put me in the position to get my college degree (personal interview).

### **Limitations**

Specific limitations existed within this study and the findings associated with it. A phenomenological research approach voiced the lived experiences of African American male athletes concerning their perceptions of the impact of collegiate sports participation on their academic achievement. The explanatory case study methodology included in-depth data analysis

and coding of themes from each semistructured face-to-face interview and the focus group relating to the central research question. However, I did not observe specific interactions of coaches, professors, or classrooms with any of the African American male athletes who participated in the study. The study site was situated in a private secured area in Southwest United States. Participants were limited to the individual Division I university. The perceptions and themes regarding the phenomenon were from African American male athletes who graduated 2015–2018 from the study site university. This research did not include a range of Division I universities across the United States.

The study included only African American male athletes who obtained a degree 2015–2018. Overall, participant experiences corresponded to African American male athletes who had graduated within the timeframe listed in the criteria. Early years of higher education (freshmen, sophomore, and junior) and African American female athletes' perceptions were excluded. The selection of participants was guided by gender, years of experience, and race. Another limitation of the study was my background; I am an African American male who played football at a Division I university. To limit bias, my personal and professional thoughts were not communicated, allowing the participants voices to be heard. Names of all participants were kept confidential and findings of the study were not shared with any person until the completion of the study.

### **Implications of the Results for Transformation**

#### **Implications on Policy**

Based on the participant responses, implications for transformation for colleges or universities included the need to meet the intellectual and emotional needs of all African American male athletes. In addition, schools must understand that each individual African

American male athlete's structural function is different, their African American identity could be at different stages, and their self-determination yields an array of responses. The implementation of effective pedagogical strategies to address academic achievement or the lack of desire is a critical component in the success of African American male athlete participating in collegiate sports. Those pedagogical strategies could include dialogue around targeted issues of racism, prejudices, discrimination, and social differences (Cooper, 2014). However, long-term success in academic achievement for African American male athletes may be sporadic and remiss without a focused effort pertaining to meeting the social and emotional needs of the individual athlete (S. Davis, 2016). Participants, as African American male athletes, voiced the desire for acceptance from their peers and college professors, and for more options for career readiness outside of being a professional athlete, starting as early as freshmen year.

## **Implications on Practice**

To address the limited studies regarding African American male athlete's psychological factors and perceptions of influence on extracurricular activities, this phenomenological research was conducted to offer a voice to African American male athletes' lived experiences and perceived impact of sports participation on their academic achievement. The results and implications of this study may encourage higher institutions of learning to address some of the perceptions of African American male athletes' failed academic achievements. These perceptions of failure can be resolved with professional development or trainings geared toward African American male athletes. An implication for future practice would be the development of programs and alternative career options for African American male athletes that may lead to increased academic achievement.

Another implication for practice would be the development of a once a year, mandatory, coaching clinic to understand the African American male athletes' biological, social, psychological, and academic needs. This clinic would also include an attitude assessment that could possibly reveal unconscious bias toward African American male athletes and their academic achievement. The solution for such an assessment is to not resolve all bias but to diminish and make coaches more aware of their own attitude toward African American male athletes and their academic achievement.

The final implication for practice should include a newly formed collegiate entry level test for all incoming freshmen of African American descent. This assessment would resemble that of the National Football League's Wonderland Assessment. This assessment would not focus just on intelligence, but would ask questions about ability to change, intrinsic and extrinsic determination, environmental pressures and factors, and academic efforts to accomplish

educational achievements. An assessment of this kind could possibly reduce academic stigmas to which African American male athletes have become accustomed, while increasing academic performance to facilitate the highest level of academic achievement.

### **Implications on Theory**

This phenomenological study was inspired by and led by the framework of Parsons (1970, 2007), Cross (1971, 1991, 1995), and Deci and Ryan (1990, 2000). The process continued through an examination to describe and reflect cognitive experiences related to the research question: How does sports participation impact the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes? The participants of the study encompassed the concepts of Parsons's (1970, 2007) theory of structural functionalism as described by all 12 participants. These concepts included adapt and change. African American male athletes took on the role of adapt and change through the acceptance that their ability to play football allowed them to adjust to society and bring about a change in their position in society. This adaptation involved learning to listen to criticism, while the change happened in an attitude to build resiliency. African American male athletes through assimilation and acculturation begin to take on the ideas, values, and religion of Western civilization. Hence, their desire becomes to have meaningful relationships with persons who share the same values, coaches who may assist in a professional career, and persons in educational leadership roles who may influence them to accomplish high academic achievements.

Parsons's (1970, 2007) work relates to the cognitive reflections of participating in a collegiate sport pertaining to academic achievement. The participants offered a voice to how they had to adapt and change to meet the demands and rigor of playing sports at a major university, all the while, an assimilation of speech and dress was taking place to blend into the structure and



function of society. The study participants also described wanting meaningful relationships with professors or any higher educational administrator in their pursuit of academic achievement because the relationship was already understood between athletes and coaches.

Cross's (1971, 1991, 1995) nigrescence model of African American identity and Deci and Ryan's (1990, 2000) SDT supported how, through five stages of development and having a personal motivation, this self-determination plays an intricate part in the academic achievement of African American male athletes. The study participants discussed in detail the five stages: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion and emersion, internalization, and internalization commitment. This theoretical connection was done through the participants' descriptions of their thoughts of self-identity, the event or events that have created a metamorphosis, an immersion of African American causes or world events and the emotional insight to bring about change for African American events, gaining of a positive African American identity, and finally, a new healthy racial identity through activism in their community. Deci and Ryan's (1990, 2000) SDT was evident by all 12 participant's accounts of needing to have autonomy in their life, a sense of belonging, and uncompromising internal and external inspiration to accomplish any academic achievements.

Glass (2015) and Harrison et al. (2015) asserted that frustrations from African American male athletes happen because disconnect exists between higher institutions and how the male African American athletes need to be successful. According to Harradine et al. (2014), frustrations have the potential to affect not just academics but the overall social preparedness for African American male athletes. Brauser (2012) and Clark, Harrison, and Bimper (2015) reported that frustrations exist throughout the lives of all athletes; the difference is that African American male athletes' frustration may have already been in place from other sources such as

family, environment, or last school attended. Colon (2014) examined memorable messages related to academic and athletic achievements. He suggested African American male athletes are frustrated because of the stress of new responsibilities and no longer having the ability to get by without studying.

The findings related to perceptions of African American male athletes regarding frustrations highlight a variety of concerns for the participants in this study. Participants 1, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 asked specifically whether new research may be able to solely focus on the frustrations among African American male athletes. Participant 7 alluded that with all the things going on in football, having frustrations was a daily battle, as if none of the coaches, professors, fellow students, or even the cafeteria workers cared. Cooper (2014), through an examination of psychological factors, suggested that African American male athletes should have open dialogue to discuss having new expectations, and the transition of culture may lead to an unspoken frustration for African American male athletes.

Glass (2015) and Rushin (2016) articles added recommendations and suggestions to improve administrators', teachers', coaches', parents', and the community's dealings with African American male athletes to improve their academic success. These stakeholders must understand and build healthy communication to improve higher grade point averages, graduation rates, and retention of African American male athletes. Both Glass and Rushin discussed the connections of meaningful relationships and a sense of personal autonomy, while describing the importance of determination, as factors in the pursuit of academic achievement for African American male athletes while participating in a collegiate sport. However, based on the results of this study, I recommend an assessment of in-coming freshmen to look at psycho-social factors,

environmental influences, parental involvement, and efforts concerning academic achievement pursuits.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommendations for future studies regarding the impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement could include an expanded sample group of participants and schools, and a comparison of male and female African American athletes. Colleges and universities throughout the country could be included to offer a broader or different set of voiced experiences from African American male athletes. Also, the perceptions of coaches or professors pertaining to African American male athletes and how that may impact academic achievement could be examined. Perceptions of athletes from different geographical locations could be analyzed for similarities and differences regarding the lived experiences of African American male athletes who did not graduate within five years of starting a university or college while playing a collegiate sport. Another recommendation for future research could include interviewing high school students who are being recruited to play at a division one college or university. These proposed studies could identify areas of concern or challenges regarding the impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement and guide future professional development decisions.

Another recommendation for future practice would be having colleges and universities provide a survey to incoming freshmen concerning academic readiness and career readiness for occupations outside of football. In addition, colleges and universities should utilize graduated former players as mentors for athletes the first 2 years of entering a college or university to play collegiate sports, along with a policy that guides coaches to emphasize academics in tandem with athletics, or at least not to denigrate academics or the intelligence of athletes.

## **Conclusion**

Athletes are coming from diverse backgrounds to participate in collegiate sports at the highest amateur level. The NCAA is at an all-time high with notoriety and graduation rates. With increasing television contracts and coaching salaries in the millions, a plateau or decline still exists in African American male athletes' academic achievement. The impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement was the focus of this explanatory case study.

In Chapter 1, I offered an introduction of the study with a background and conceptual framework. In the conceptual framework I gave details about theories, Parsons's (1970, 2007) structural functionalism, Cross's (1971, 1991, 1995) nigrescence model of African American identity, and Deci and Ryan's (1990, 2000) SDT. Parsons, Cross, and Deci and Ryan gave the foundational principles of my study. After the conceptual framework, I then gave a statement of the problem, purpose of the study, and comprised the research question: How does sport participation affect the pursuit of academic achievement among African American collegiate male athletes? I then explained my rationale, relevance, and significance of the study. A definition of terms, assumptions, delimitations, and limitations along with a summary concluded Chapter 1.

To begin Chapter 2, I started with a literature review. I reviewed the work of Colon (2014), Cooper (2014), S. Davis (2016), and Harrison et al. (2015). This literature review led to a literature search revealing strategies and tools that I utilized to find information about my study. This utilization of information led to an in-depth explanation of the conceptual framework. I explained in detail Parsons's (1970, 2007) theory of structural functionalism, Cross's (1971, 1991, 1995) nigrescence model of African American identity, and Deci and Ryan's (1990, 2000)

SDT. The results of this study exemplified specifics about how African American male athletes desire a sense of belonging in society, outlining each of the five stages of the nigrescence model of African American identity, and finally, revealing how self-determination is a key factor for African American male athletes. This theoretical and conceptual framework led me to conduct a review of the literature along with a synthesis of the research. Chapter 2 concluded with a critique of previous research and a summary.

In Chapter 3, I addressed my research question through the rigor of using current research methods such as identifying myself as the main researcher, outlining my role as the researcher, stating my research population of African American male collegiate athletes who obtained a college degree from 2015–2018 and I offered logic of the participant selection. After that, I explained my instrumentation of face-to-face interviews and a focus group both using a self-designed semistructured open-ended questionnaire. Next, I collected and analyzed the data through procedures such as transcribing observational and anecdotal notes, making sure to offer and have a transcription review. During the transcription review, I used open, axial, and selective coding to place themes into headings, concepts, and subheadings. An explanation was provided pertaining to limitations of the research design. A statement of ethical issues such as confidentiality and the securing of transcripts was explained. The researcher's position along with a summary concluded Chapter 3.

In Chapter 4, I provided a summary of the participant's age, marital status, career, and degree is provided in Table 1. Through the methodology and analysis section, I describes how I transcribed all data within 36 hours, which also included a transcription review. I included a summary of the findings describing participant's cognitive reflections of feeling different from other college students, extended hours of a day, and how academics became an after-thought

while playing their sport. Next, there was a presentation of the data and results with a summary of the entire chapter.

Chapter 5 has included findings of this explanatory case study regarding the impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes' academic achievement. Findings regarding the voiced experiences of African American male athletes and the impact of collegiate sports participation on academic achievement were presented and connected to current literature. I analyzed data from seven face-to-face interviews and one focus group of five participants utilizing open, axial, and selective coding techniques. The participants' voiced responses revealed the importance of academic achievement while participating in collegiate sports. The key themes that emerged from the data included: (a) typical days are not like other students', (b) long days, (c) time management, (d) consequences for missing practice, (e) and academics are undervalued.

I further discussed theoretical and transformative implications and connected them with practical implications for future practice. Recommendations for future study included expanding the sample size, comparing African American males and females, and expanding to numerous geographic locations. Participants in this study offered a frank description of the desire for practical approaches or practices to meet the needs of African American male athletes to increase academic achievement while participating in collegiate sports. As Participant 8 stated, "Practical approaches should always include freshmen every 2 years because they would know what they need and desire, and being included reminds them there is a life after football." In addition, participants highlighted the need for open discussions for professional development to inform African American male athletes about perceptions of attending higher education on a collegiate scholarship, and earlier interventions with African American male athletes to address academic

achievement shortfalls as future collegiate scholarship participants. “Knowing that a former player is going to talk to me about his shortfalls and that this could happen to me, would have been so impactful” (Participant 4, personal interview). According to Participant 7, “Open discussions with current or former African American male athletes could have, no I know it would have, made me consider the importance of academic achievement a lot sooner, while participating in football” (personal interview).

African American male athletes should understand at the beginning of their commitment and self-identification to any athletic quest, how important their educational pursuit is, and that education is the key. Education provides a pivotal foundation for flexible career hopes. African American male athletes should accept that sports are not a steppingstone to get into college, but rather sports are a reinforcement of strategies and tools to assist with obtaining a college degree. Focusing on the idea that college is not one more step before becoming a professional athlete, but rather African American male athletes also need to focus on college as a time to learn new strategies to expand their knowledge base about career opportunities and the importance of their academic achievement for getting a college degree.

The impact of collegiate sports participation on African American male athletes’ academic achievement goes beyond the notion of attending a college or university but should focus on retention and graduation. The art of retention and graduation firmly lies on the idea of relatability. Relatability works on the premise of accessibility and approachability, authentic instruction, decreasing spokesperson pressure, and minimizing micro-aggressions in class. Incoming African American male athletes should be granted the opportunity to hear of the impact of succeeding or not succeeding in academic achievement from other African American

male athletes and the outcomes associated with such success, to simply bring forth relatability on the impact of sports participation on academic achievement.



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## **Appendix A: Consent Form**

**Research Study Title:** The Effect of Collegiate Sports Participation on the African American Male Athlete's Academic Achievement

**Principle Investigator:** James E. Tucker

**Research Institution:** Concordia University–Portland

**Faculty Advisor:** Christopher Maddox, Ph.D.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the face-to-face interviews and one focus group is to seek the perceptions of how did sports participation affect African American male collegiate athletes while being a college student? I expect to have seven face-to-face interviews and one focus group consisted of five African American male athletes who have graduated while attending a major division 1 university. There will be no compensation provided to the participants who volunteer to take part in the study.

We will begin this study on April 2, 2018 and end on April 13, 2018. I will give specific athletes delineating information regarding the study. I should receive email regarding names of those persons interested to be part of the study in April. At that particular time, I will disclose the location of the secured private room. The first meeting with all volunteer participants, I will give pseudonyms and set up appointments for face-to-face interviews. Approximately one week after face-to-face interviews, I will conduct the one time focus group. The face-to-face interviews should take approximately 45 minutes and the focus group will not exceed 90 minutes.

### **BENEFITS**

The benefits of participating in an explanatory case study to address how does sports participation impact African American male collegiate athletes while pursuing a college degree may enlighten administrators, coaches, teachers, peers, community, and other African American male athletes of obstacles or motivations to obtain a college degree while playing collegiate sports.

### **RISKS**

The participants of this case study minimum risks consists of providing information that pertains to their experience. Any information provided will be coded therefore it cannot be linked to you. All information will be kept confidential and in a secured locked area of the primary researcher. None of the data will have any information of identification of the participant. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed after the conclusion of the study.

## RIGHT TO WITHDRAW

We understand because the questions that are being asked are personal in nature, you are free at any given time to pause, stop, or disengage in this process. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer. If at any time during the interview or focus group you feel a negative emotion from your response, you may stop or I will stop asking you questions. This study is not a requirement therefore there is not a penalty for not participating.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about the study you can contact the lead investigator, James E. Tucker. His email is [redacted]. If you wish to speak to a participant advocate other than the lead investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch ([obran@cu-portland.edu](mailto:obran@cu-portland.edu)) or call 503-493-6390.

## STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

---

Participant Name

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

James E. Tucker

---

Investigator Name

---

Date

---

Investigator Signature

---

Date

## INVESTIGATORS:

James E. Tucker      email: [redacted]  
c/o: Professor Christopher Maddox, Ph.D.  
Concordia University–Portland  
2811 NE Holman St  
Portland, OR 97211

## **Appendix B: Recruitment Email and Script for Solicitation of Participants**

My name is James E. Tucker and I am a third-year student in the Doctoral of Education program at Concordia University–Portland. I am contacting you in the development of my dissertation. I aim to identify potential participant recruitment sources. This dissertation will seek to broaden the understanding of how sports participation impacts African American male collegiate athletes' academic achievement.

This study will explore the relationship between African American males' involvement with sports and positive or negative approaches to education. Participation is voluntary and all information provided will be completely confidential.

There has been a great deal of research on African American males and college sports, but little is known on the impact that playing sports may have on the efforts attributed to education. My hope is that this study will not only extend the research and raise awareness about the athletes' experiences of the positive or negative effects of playing sports on education but will also obtain preliminary information that could lead to strategies to assist male African American athletes in achieving a good educational foundation.

I am contacting you to inquire about whether you or your organization would be willing to assist me in recruitment of African American male collegiate athletes who graduated from 2015–2018 to serve as participants. If you or your organization is not able to assist with recruitment, any information or referral to another potential recruitment avenue would be greatly appreciated. I would be happy to answer any additional questions or discuss this dissertation further.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

James E. Tucker  
[contact information redacted]

### **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

The following questions were used with participants in the one-on-one interviews:

1. Describe your favorite class studied.
2. For you, as an African American male athlete, describe your typical day in the past as a student–athlete.
3. What was your biggest athletic achievement while in college?
4. How have your academics been affected by your participation in sports while attending college?
5. Describe how your commitment to sports affected your academic requirements.
6. What was your greatest academic achievement while in college?
7. What were your impressions of your status as an African American male on a campus with so few African American males? (Harper et al., 2013)
8. Describe any significant experiences related to your unique status as an African American male athlete.

## **Appendix D: Focus Group Questions**

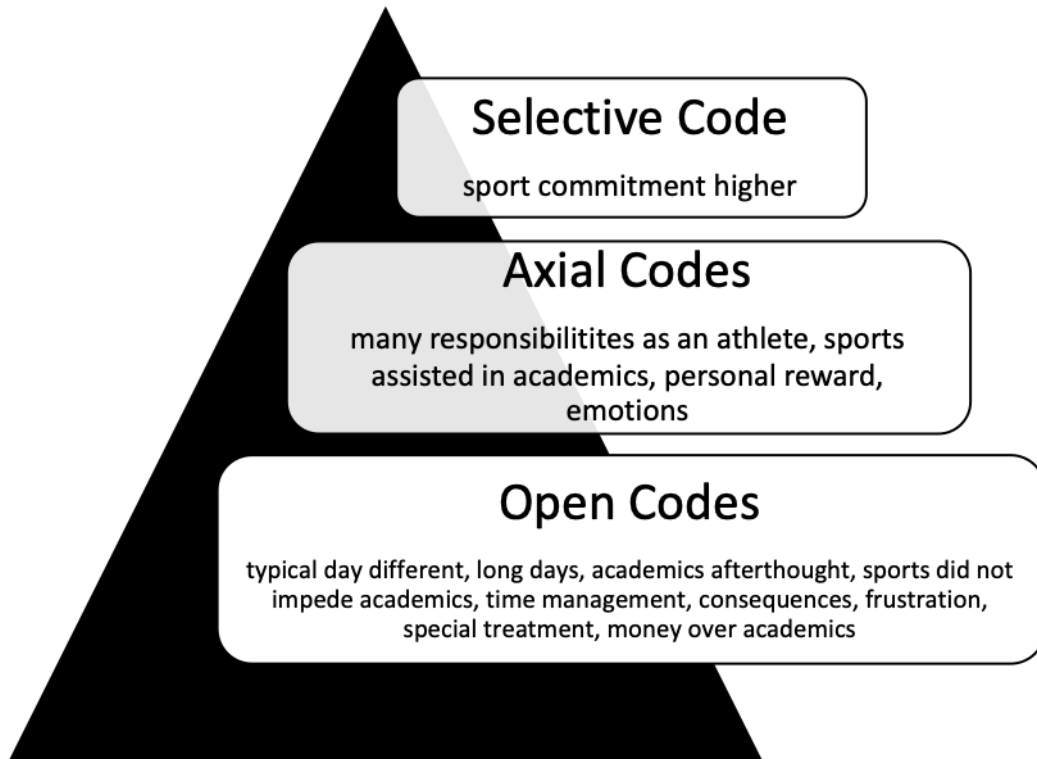
The following questions were used with participants in the focus group:

1. For you, as African American male athletes, describe your typical day in the past.
2. What were your expectations regarding the balance of your athletic, academic, and social roles prior to college matriculation?
3. What were your experiences regarding the balance of your athletic, academic, and social roles after college matriculation?
4. Describe how your commitment to sports impeded your academics as African American male athletes.
5. As African American male athletes describe how educational professionals (teachers, coaches, principals, professors) played a role in your academic pursuit.
6. Did you perceive fellow teammates being gently or forcefully pushed into specific academic courses?
7. How did playing your sport affect your ability to engage in academic, social, or career development activities during college?
8. When did academics become significant in your life?
9. If you had to choose, which would have more emphasis in your life—academics or sports?
10. During the recruiting process, which was more important—academics or athletics?
11. How prepared were you academically, compared to sports, to enter into your university? (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013)
12. As African American males on campus, what significant experiences with academics did you have?

13. Describe how your academic requirements affected your sport commitment.
14. How did sports participation affect your study while being college students?
15. While being student–athletes, what expectations did you have about academics?
16. What was or is the most disturbing problem you faced as African American male athletes pertaining to coaches or professors' attitudes about academics?
17. Describe any significant experiences related to your unique status as African American male athletes.



## Appendix E: Data Analysis Codes



## **Appendix F: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously- researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### ***What does “fraudulent” mean?***

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### ***What is “unauthorized” assistance?***

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

### Statement of Original Work (continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Digital Signature

Name (Typed)

Date